



3

—シーキューブ—
CubexCurseCxCurious

XV

水瀬葉月
Illustration さとりがため

電撃文庫

水瀬葉月

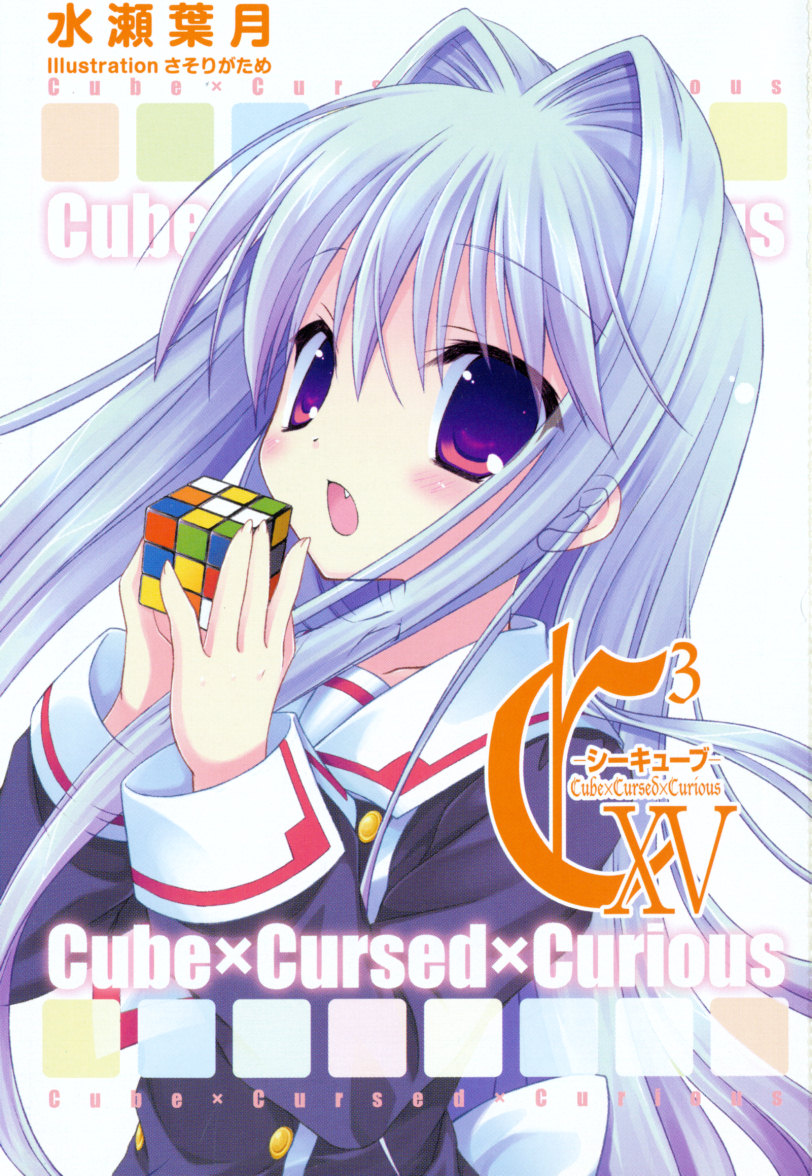
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Designed by Toru Suzuki



BASKETBALL FEAR!



3
—シーキューブ—
Cube×Cursed×Curious

XV

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

Prologue

Part 1

"Mmm~ So good~♪ Yes, yes, miso soup with spinach added, now that's our family recipe~... Haruaki, your cooking skills have improved again~"

The mysterious woman calling herself Haruaki's father continued to eat dinner while smiling cheerfully while everyone else could only narrow their eyes, staring at her in a daze.

Half of the food laid out on the dining table was Haruaki's own cooking while the other half was takeout delivery. As for the food that could be called cooked by Haruaki, almost all of it consisted of leftovers, miso soup included. Since Haruaki had gotten injured during the chaotic battle to retrieve Konoha, he was naturally disallowed from holding the kitchen knife—Besides, the current situation, having dinner first while putting many issues on hold for now, arose only because Haruaki's shoulder wound started hurting again just as he was about to interrogate the mysterious woman.

(...)

Haruaki thought back to earlier, when Kuroe was preparing hair with upgraded healing powers, Konoha was trying to remove Haruaki's clothing and the whole situation was a frantic mess—

"You got injured? Oh dear~ Come."

Unbelievably, the mysterious woman took out the first aid kit from the living room cupboard without needing to search at all, as though she had known where it was kept from the beginning.

Then once treatment was finished, Fear voiced her hunger and oddly enough, the mysterious woman also went with the flow and sat down at the table—all the way till now.

"Wow! This stew's taste brings back so many memories~ It's impossible to eat this kind of stew when abroad. I'm almost developing symptoms of soy sauce deficiency... Munch munch munch. Mmm~ Lovely—!"

Age indeterminate from outward appearance, she could be pegged as a university student or slightly older as a young married woman. Clad in a cream-colored tight skirt with a suit, her well-proportioned body featured a voluptuous bust and slender lower body. In addition, her long hair was soft and elegant. With a myriad of ever changing expressions, the features of her face seemed quite familiar in and of themselves—Really? Besides, most people wouldn't deliberately recall the details of their relative's face, right? Alike or not alike? Haruaki was equally uncertain.

Ultimately, everything was very contradictory. Naturally, his father was a man; this person was female no matter how you looked. Pops kept a stubbly beard; this person's chin was clean and smooth. His father was of average height and build; this person had a sexy figure. Male voice; female voice.

Inconsistent. Polar opposites. Impossible. Absolutely impossible. However. However—

"...Ugh!"

Haruaki's right arm was suspended in a sling to avoid moving his injured shoulder. Using his left hand to place his teacup onto the table, he groaned while covering his face with his palm.

"H-Haruaki, what's wrong!? Pull yourself together!"

"Yachi! Does your wound still hurt?"

"H-Haruaki-kun! Kuroe-san, I'm sorry to ask this of you since you're so exhausted already but please heal him again—"

Feeling the girls sitting at the same dining table all getting up to their feet in a clamor, Haruaki suddenly looked up. He could not bear this anymore.

Then—He pointed his index finger across the table.

"The habit of saving favorite food for last! Eating cherry tomatoes whole along with the green calyx! Holding chopsticks in a slightly peculiar manner! Many other things as well!"

Then he suddenly lost strength, going limp and hunchback, covering his face with one hand.

"As much as I don't want to admit it, there's no mistake... It's Pops. This guy is my father..."

Muttering in despair, he shook his head while trembling. There was nothing else he could do.

"No way~ You still won't believe me? Isn't that what I said from the start?"

The mysterious woman responded, completely unperturbed. Kirika frequently glanced at her(?) and said:

"S-Seriously...? Yachi?"

"As much as I don't want to believe it, Class Rep... It looks like it's true..."

Although the vast majority (mainly gender and physique) of traits were contradictory, other subtle movements and temperament definitely felt quite familiar. Throughout Haruaki's lifetime so far, this was his closest and most intimate relative, the one who had lived with Haruaki matter-of-factly—but at the same time, also spent an almost equal amount of time living away from home matter-of-factly.

With a troubled face, Kirika shifted her gaze as though looking for help. Her lips in a frown, Konoha spoke:

"Hmm... I can understand Ueno-san's feelings, but regrettably, I too can sort of sense, vaguely vaguely~, that this person's mind belongs to Honatsu-san's..."

"Hmm... When I first met Honatsu at the secret vault in that abandoned castle, he didn't look like this, of course. But how should I put this? I think he definitely has the same smell."

"Yeah~ I don't think this is an impostor..."

As though trying to oppose the mysterious visitor, Fear took away all the food on the dishes while offering her thoughts. Presumably due to exhaustion, Kuroe was speaking in more of a daze than usual. As a side note, a lock of Kuroe's hair had turned snow-white because of overusing her hair's healing power, making Haruaki feel quite bad about it.

They had already combined a spare table, but in addition, sitting at the dining table, which was still quite cramped, was at the kimono-clad girl with hair styled in curls—correction, kimono-clad boy—Kotetsu. Apart from looking up every now and then, he was eating the stew without caring for the situation at all.

"Traditional Japanese cuisine... It's been so long..." Since that was what he had muttered quietly when he first saw the dining table, perhaps he was enjoying the stew in total immersion.

In any case, Kirika kept quiet, apparently giving up on saying further on the matter after seeing everyone's responses. Nevertheless, she did not forget to leave her usual catchphrase at the dining table.

Indeed, absolutely ridiculous. Although there were undeniable aspects to the situation, they did not make things any easier to accept.

Haruaki stared at "her" from across the dining table—*I guess it's okay for me to admit by this point*—staring at the woman who was allegedly his father, Yachi Honatsu. It must be asked. This decisive question that had been held back until now.

"So... Why have you turned into looking like a woman, Pops...?"

"She" looked up with very serious eyes. Continuing to chew habitually, "she" then swallowed with a gulp. Then after picking up the teacup for a sip to moisten "her" throat, "she" returned the teacup to the table. Maintaining an upright sitting

posture, "she" took on the son's gaze squarely and quietly closed "her" eyes to meditate as though thinking about what to say.

Then when "her" eyes opened again—

Tilting her head slightly, she smiled demurely—and answered:

"Hmm~ ...An image change?"

"How can there be this kind of *image change*!?"

Haruaki retorted reflexively in full force while pondering.

That impression conveyed from "her" face when tilting "her" head completely unabashedly...

Haruaki knew that feeling very well.

An air of aloof self-satisfaction. Occasional childishness. A sense of unfathomability. A feeling as though this person would float away lightly the moment you took your eyes off them briefly, unfettered as dandelion flowers.

Yes. Indeed. As one would expect. The existence before his eyes was truly—

"..."

Helplessly understanding this fact on a deeply personal level, it probably served as some sort of trigger.

Suddenly, Haruaki felt his back struck by an indescribable sense of fatigue. Utterly drained, he was robbed of all vitality and words. Feeling a hollow feeling unwilling to do anything, Haruaki was enveloped in a sense of resignation, a kind of "whatever, I don't care anymore" feeling.

Slowly straightening his knees, he stood up from his seat cushion.

"I'm full. Sorry about the clearing up... Can I trouble you girls...? I just feel so tired for some reason. I'd like to go back to my room to sleep as soon as possible."

"Of course that's fine..."

Konoha looked at him in worry as he walked past her, about to leave the living room. Fear's puzzled face, Kuroe's dazed face, Kirika's solemn face, Kotetsu's indifferent face—

The only face he did not look at belonged to a certain person allegedly his father.

"Konoha's finally back... I just want to say that I must hurry and recuperate from my injuries and return to ordinary life. Ordinary life is the best, after all. Oh right, midterms are coming up, so I must study hard next. You girls better start studying sooner too~"

Feeling Konoha and the girls worrying about him, Haruaki forced out a wry smile for appearance's sake and made that speech.

Then he left the living room.

Haruaki had departed from the living room with unsteady footsteps. His final words also sounded like an attempt to escape reality. Despite feigning nonchalance, he was actually reeling back from a heavy blow—That was what Konoha thought.

"—Well then..."

Konoha put down her teacup. Although it was not meant to be a synchronizing signal, in that instant, all movement stopped on the dining table. Fear, Kirika, Kuroe and even Kotetsu all looked in the same direction.

Konoha narrowed her eyes and stared at Honatsu—As difficult as it was to believe, it really was him, ostensibly. Basically, he was the benefactor who had

brought her to this home, but given the current developments, she really wanted to forget her debt to him completely. Leaving home for such a long period of time, returning in the form of a woman—Konoha could not muster any respect for the hot potato in creating this ludicrous situation.

No matter what, given the current circumstances, he might be willing to disclose to them matters he found difficult to broach in front of his son. Konoha went straight to the chase:

"So, why do you look like this now? If you don't mind, could you tell us in more detail?"

"Like I said, this is an image change, you know~"

Honatsu picked up the teapot on his own and refilled his cup, tilting his head while waving his soft, light hair. He was apparently determined to play the fool to the very end on this matter.

Many countermeasures surfaced in Konoha's mind, such as asking the same question again, choking him by the throat while threatening him, etc, but having experienced so much today, she was mentally and physically taxed to the extreme. What must not be forgotten. What she did not wish to forget. The crimes she had committed. The future she ought to advance towards. The sensation of his lips. Konoha really wanted to put all other troublesome matters aside so that she could savor these thoughts thoroughly in bed under the covers. Those were her true feelings currently.

Furthermore, if this person was truly the Honatsu she knew, he definitely was not going to talk so easily. Despite acting senselessly sometimes and impossible track down, Yachi Honatsu was also someone in command of stubborn willpower, never changing his mind easily once he made decisions. In this regard—He was just like his son.

In any case, Konoha sighed to express her displeasure then said:

"Well then... Allow me to alter my question slightly. What brings you home this time so suddenly despite having been away for so long without any communications at all?"

"Oh dear, it's not allowed? This is my home after all."

"Speaking of which, what the heck have you been doing after sending me here?"

Fear noisily ripped open the bag of after-dinner rice crackers and glared viciously at Honatsu.

"Hmm~ ...This is also a secret... I guess?"

"Hona-papa has so many secrets~"

"Hono-papa?"

"Kiririn, just so you know, that's Papa Honatsu."

Seeing the subject about to drift into a tangent, Konoha coughed deliberately.

"So, the reason why you came back with such timing... Only coincidence, wasn't it?"

"Oh no, it wasn't coincidence."

Honatsu candidly gave a surprising answer. Konoha threw him an inquiring glance and he shrugged.

"I was thinking all of you girls would be discussing this already... Looks like none of you are in the mood right now. The way I see it, there's only one reason for me to return now, right?"

Leaning his elbows against the table, with a cute motion, he rested his chin on his slender fingers that were clasped together.

Smiling tenderly, he continued.

"Because—I must celebrate my son's birthday with him at least, right?"

Part 2

The report given over the phone was extremely interesting.

As a result, the man grinned slightly and repeated the previous words that had been said to him.

"Is that so? Nirushaaki lost?"

He closed his eyes. This action was very suited to light reminiscence. Possessing the mask with three abilities, the shirt that could neutralize attacks as well as Nagasone Kotetsu—He recalled her figure whom he had engaged in battle many times in the past.

Pondering with eyes closed also produced a side effect. A familiar sense of rocking enveloping his entire body seemed to increase slightly in intensity. This was a comfortable rhythm ruling over the entire premises, one that normally escaped notice.

Sitting on the chair, he allowed his body to sway according to that rhythm in mesmerization—

"Hey~ What are you thinking about?"

A voice reached his ear. Smiling, he opened one eye and said:

"Hmm? Do I really need to spell it out...? Of course I'm thinking about a rare specimen of a great woman~"

"What!? Again!? You philanderer! Aren't you satisfied when you have us already—!?"

The voice by his ear suddenly rose in pitch while his head was shaken violently this way and that.

"What's the point in getting jealous of someone who's dead?"

"That's besides the point here! It concerns the matter of a woman's heart!"

Turning his head, he found her pouting face before his eyes. He gazed at her intently.

"W-What?"

He kept staring at her intently until she finally went red in the face and turned her gaze away.

"W-Whatever, it's not like I'm unreasonable. Since you're already reflection, it's not like I can't forgive you as long as you show evidence of your remorse. In other words, umm... Uh... Smooch~"

After squirming awkwardly for a while, she closed her eyes and puckered her lips, drawing her face close to his.

However, before he could react to her, a hand suddenly reached out from the side and caught the top half of her dainty face firmly.

"Hmm? How odd? I can't advance further. Are you shy? Is that the kind of game you'd like to play? The kind where two people's bonds are strengthened after overcoming obstacles? Great~ Mmm! Muu! Ugee~..."

"So tirelessly lively as usual, how delightful/annoying... Back to the subject, may I ask what are your plans?"

The hand's owner was speaking in her cold tone of voice and idiosyncratic speech pattern as usual.

The girl who still tried to bring her lips against him despite the iron clawed attack on her face. The woman who was expressionlessly executing the iron clawed attack.

Taking a glance at both of them, he looked up at the ceiling for no particular reason.

"Hmm, there's no need to hurry over... Still, there's something else that needs to be done."

"—Meaning?"

"No need for a change in course. Since the summoning orders have been issued, let's continue slowly while waiting for everyone to gather."

"I find that to be quite agreeable/troublesome. Affirmative, Master."

She nodded slightly to express comprehension.

Reaching out with two fingers towards the face belonging to the girl who was still fighting the iron claw valiantly, he pinched her lips together, tugging and twisting them like a toy as he pleased.

"Mmm? Mmmmmmmmm!?! What skill is this? So awesome!"

Hearing her speak with all sorts of misconceptions, he suddenly relaxed his expression.

Only then did he realize that he was unexpectedly looking forward to future developments.

This could possibly be why he wanted to go slowly. As though savoring the taste further, this was simply the anticipation for a certain upcoming event right now.

Narrowing his eyes, he muttered to himself.

"Indeed—Perhaps I met even get to meet a nostalgic fellow."

"You're speaking normally while kissing at the same time! Ah, this isn't kissing at all! I was thinking something seemed weird, then this hand blocking me is also... Mmmguh!"

Seeing the girl finally realizing the situation and starting to scream and yell, he kissed her on the lips this time for real, calming her as though to apologize for everything earlier.

Chapter 1 - The Creature Allegedly My Father / "His birthday (I)"

Part 1

Many things must be changing slowly, he thought.

To be honest, Haruaki could only feel lost in response to these changes. All the gradually changing matters had no answer. None of them were things he could understand.

He thought of Kirika. A friend from the same homeroom since the first year of high school, she was the straitlaced class representative, his lunch duel opponent as well as his comrade sharing the secret of curses.

Saying she loved and regarded him as a member of the opposite gender, Kirika had confessed to him.

She was unable to escape her cursed bondage suit. However, this had absolutely no bearing on his feelings towards her. Kirika was Kirika. Intelligent, beautiful, kind, competitive and never admitting defeat.

Extremely... adorable.

He could not possibly dislike her. Rather—He probably liked her.

Because simply imagining it made his heart pound uncontrollably.

Suppose he were to take a stroll with her, just the two of them, or going somewhere fun to have a good time, or cooking together, sharing a meal, or touching—her body.

He believed that it would be a most happy thing. Happiness beyond a doubt.

However, his thoughts paused at this point. He could not find the path he ought to advance along.

Hence, what should he do? What should he say? What course of action should he take?

His own feelings were very confused, impossible to unify. This was a first experience. Anxiety was the only emotion he could forcibly feel out.

He had asked her to wait for his answer because of Konoha's incident happening earlier.

In fact, they had discussed things in the kitchen and she had reminded him. Indeed, now that Konoha had returned safe and sound, he must tell her his answer. He must hurry.

Nevertheless... What was the answer?

As though jumping into a newly discovered path, he was thinking of another person who now surfaced in his thoughts.

Namely, Konoha. The cursed Japanese sword he had known since a very long time ago, the family member who was like an older sister, the fellow student in the same grade who had started going to school together with him ever since he entered high school.

She, who had professed her love for him and even kissed him...

Konoha was Konoha. But upon thinking calmly, Haruaki realized she was undoubtedly a woman as well. Having a gentle smiling face, understanding him better than anyone, always standing on his side no matter what, possessing an excellent figure, exuding an aura that made him feel at peace just by being next to her, that was Konoha.

Indeed, Haruaki felt very comfortable around her. Very happy. The feelings he experienced from her was probably not going to change in the future.

However—He also needed to give Konoha an answer, right?

His thoughts entered another dead end again.

So, what should he do? What kind of answer should he give? In order to reach an answer, what should he be thinking about?

"...Haruaki-kun..."

Oh sorry, Konoha, are you here to hurry me? Please give me a moment.

"Haruaki-kun... Ufufu..."

She was not angry. Not only that, she was giggling with some kind of deeper meaning.

How odd? Just as Haruaki tilted his head, he noticed that his entire body was surrounded by... How should he describe this? A feeling akin to "Konoha-ness." It was a very attractive feeling belonging to Konoha, very Konoha-like in sensation, even to the point that it was Konoha herself. Or perhaps one could call this "intensely Konoha-ing."

(...?)

What the heck am I thinking? Something doesn't seem right—Just as Haruaki was thinking that in a corner of his mind, a certain distinctive sensation appeared on his face apart from Konoha-ness. Poke poke, something was poking him in the cheek.

"Ahhh... Haruaki-kun... I knew it..."

This voice. The cheek-poking sensation. His brain suddenly understood that this was all reality.

So basically? Indeed.

In other words, the only one who had not yet returned to reality was himself alone—

Hence, Haruaki opened his eyes to find Konoha's face up close in front of him.

The two of them were close enough to feel each other's breathing. She was even smiling with slight rapture.

Then using her index finger, she kept poking his cheek gently.

Even after discovering that he had opened his eyes, she remained unflustered—

"Ara, Haruaki-kun. Good morning."

Smiling tenderly, she greeted him.

The fact that Konoha's face was so near meant that she had burrowed under his blanket. Haruaki finally figured out that the "Konoha-ness" he had felt in his dreamlike state was actually the umbrella term for the soft and comfortable sensation produced from squeezing tightly with Konoha in this narrow space—

"—Nwahhhhhh!?"

Haruaki frantically jumped up, wrapping the blanket around himself then retreating rapidly. For only an instant, the baseless speculation of "Konoha wouldn't be naked by any chance, right?" flashed across his mind, but fortunately, she was definitely clothed—Then he felt ashamed for his delusion instead. What the heck was he imagining!?

"W-Why are you in my bed...!?"

Completely unabashed, Konoha remained on the bedding that was left behind, tilting her head with her chin resting on her hands.

"Uh~ When I came to rouse you from bed, Haruaki-kun, because your sleeping face was too adorable... I couldn't help it, so I—"

"C-Couldn't help it?"

"Indeed, I couldn't help it. My apologies."

She beamed with a smile. It was the same familiar smiling face but the meaning conveyed was different from before. Her mode of behavior was also definitely

different from before. The sense of distance had changed. Compared to all other times, this sense of distance was much more proactive.

Konoha's eyes suddenly flashed at this time then lowered her gaze.

"Umm—If this really displeases you, Haruaki-kun... Sorry. I seriously apologize to you."

Because Konoha's expression was too sad—

"No... It won't... It's okay."

"Really? I'm so glad."

She beamed again. Staring into each other's eyes. That sense of distance with her on the bedding. Haruaki's heart rate was rising.

Just as Haruaki gulped hard—

"..."

"Eeek!?"

Spontaneously, Haruaki noticed an unfamiliar figure standing silently at the doorway. Taking a closer look, he realized it was Kotetsu. The reason why Haruaki had failed to recognize him at first glance was because Kotetsu's hair was untied unlike usual and he was also wearing Konoha's old pajamas. Kotetsu must have just gotten up as well.

Haruaki was thinking Kotetsu would say something but he simply stared into the room unerringly. His eyes were subtly narrowed. The roaring pounce of fury never arrived.

However, for some unknown reason...

Haruaki could tell there was another type of reprimanding aura conveyed in Kotetsu's gaze. Indeed, if one had to make an analogy—It was like he was scolding Haruaki: "What a spineless coward!"

"Uh, umm, this is..."

In any case, just as Haruaki was trying to explain the situation, a new figure appeared behind Kotetsu.

This was also another person who was not present in this home until yesterday.

This certain person was wearing what ought to be his own pajamas, but the top was stretched very tightly. A certain person who had the top few buttons unfastened with cleavage exposed. A certain person whose pair of sleepy eyes seemed a bit familiar, but produced an even stronger sense of dissonance.

However, as soon as this person craned forward to peer into the room from over Kotetsu's head, he immediately stared wide-eyed and woke up in a flash.

"Oh my! Haruaki, I can't believe you entered the adult phase while I was gone..."

"Of course not!"

"I had a feeling this would happen, which is why I asked Konoha to live in the accessory dwelling... But you guys changed the rules on your own at some point in time and started living together! Once unbridled, you will only immerse yourselves in lust... Oh dear, what depravity of youth! I feel deeply responsible for this. Sob sob sob..."

Honatsu was rubbing the corners of his eyes, pretending to cry very deliberately.

Haruaki had lost the energy to deal with him a long time ago and could only sigh.

Haruaki found it truly wonderful that they could bring Konoha back and return to the normal life they once had, but he could sense that there were still many things with unclear future paths in the days ahead.

Kirika, Konoha, Kotetsu who had newly joined this family, and this mysterious creature allegedly his father.

Whose issues should he start with? Where should he start? What should he prioritize to contemplate? His mind was in total chaos—

"What what? What about lust? That's a word that can only be called shameless in all respects! Everyone freeze where you are and don't move—!"

A certain patter of noises came from outside the room. In terms of how to survive the situation at hand, this meant that Haruaki was burdened with one more matter he needed to think about.

Nevertheless, Fear's voice was the only thing that was almost identical to before.

For some reason, Haruaki felt grateful for that.

Part 2

After sitting herself down hard on the cushion in the veranda, Fear angrily crushed rice crackers between her teeth.

"Seriously! That guy is outrageous as always!"

"Hmm. Although things have changed, it also seems like nothing's changed as well. But it does come as a relief to me that another lively scene has returned to this home at last."

Kuroe sat down lightly in formal seiza posture on the cushion beside her, holding a teacup in both hands while sipping tea, commenting with a faint wry smile. Thinking "how carefree!", Fear frowned but ultimately picked up another rice cracker without saying anything.

While listening to the crisp crunching sounds coming from her mouth, Fear suddenly recalled what Kuroe had just said.

Changed, yet nothing had changed as well.

"..."

That must be it. Whether Haruaki or Konoha, something must have changed along the way back to this home. Although it looked like nothing had changed as a result, Fear believed that there was still a dramatic change on a mental level,

because something that even a bystander like her would consider "only natural for that to result" occurred right before her eyes.

So, for herself who had watched *that* unfold... Did anything change?

"...Ahem."

Fear deliberately coughed then glanced to the side. In a mumbling voice, joking in an intentional manner to hide her embarrassment, she said:

"By the way, Kuroe-no-suke, may I have a private word with you?"

"Yes, my lord! What is it?"

Playing along, Kuroe responded appropriately in an instant. Still sitting formally in seiza on the cushion, she rotated herself by ninety degrees, pointing her knees towards Fear as though acting out a historical drama.

Fear suddenly relaxed her expression. Kuroe had apparently noticed the feelings in her heart and was thus someone whom Fear could consult confidentially. Fear felt very fortunate to have someone like that by her side.

"...Honatsu said something about a birthday, right? I'd like to ask about that."

"Yes, it's Haru's birthday, I believe. Do you know exactly which day and month it is?"

"No idea."

"Uh... It happens to be exactly ten days from now."

"Weird, I get the feeling there's something planned already. Something very important as well."

"Oh... Speaking of which, Ficchi, you guys are having exams soon, right? I remember Haru's birthday is on the day after exams are over."

Now that it was mentioned, Fear was certain. Although she was starting to feel bothered by exams now, she decided to put the issue aside for now.

"I see, now I know the date. So, I wanted to know something else..."

Naturally, back when she first arrived, Fear did not know the significance of birthdays. But by this point, Fear had already lived in Japan for quite a long while during which she had seen many classmates celebrate their birthdays. As a result, she knew that birthdays were important events for modern Japanese people with major celebrations.

However, the issue was—

What about for Haruaki?

"Now that I think back carefully, I've never heard that guy mention this. Did he simply forget?"

"Ah~ ...You're right. If anything, Haru doesn't like holding noisy parties when his birthday comes around... I guess?"

Fear was a bit shocked. Weren't birthdays meant to have parties? A chance to celebrate spectacularly and go wild? Something like Christmas.

She leaned forward to inquire from Kuroe the reason in greater detail—

The reason turned out to be very simple.

From what Kuroe had heard, the reason why Haruaki did not enjoy lively celebrations of his birthday stemmed from his childhood when it was the only day that his father was guaranteed to hurry home from his travels. Things were fine up to the end of elementary school, but after entering middle school, Haruaki began to resent the feeling that he was forced to accommodate his father's attempt to fulfill obligations, which was why he wanted to spend his birthdays as ordinarily as possible. At first, it might have been nothing more than a rebellious phase, an attempt to defy his father, but Fear could empathize. She also heard that

Kuroe and Konoha would not do anything more than giving him presents on that day.

Fear could not help but feel demoralized.

"Really...? No party, just giving presents?"

Why would she feel this way? Fear found her own feelings quite unbelievable.

Basically—Right. Because she had already decided as a matter of fact that a grand and lively celebration was in order. Because she looked forward to seeing what kind of expression he would make if a party were to be held. A shameless expression just like the one he made last Christmas. If possible, she wanted to make Haruaki show that kind of face. She really wanted to see it. She wanted to stay by his side, experiencing that uplifting feeling—

She began to think deeper. Was she feeling depressed because she had decided on her own to hold out hopes which were now dashed? Currently, she felt a bit weird. Why were her thoughts so impetuous and prone to jumping to conclusions?

(...Am I... impatient?)

Yeah, I guess I'll admit it. Existing inside her heart was definitely an irritable sense of impatience.

The reason? She knew it too.

It was due to Konoha that time. Because she had watched her do something like that at close range—After confessing her love, Konoha had even kissed Haruaki's lips.

What happened then had not only affected Haruaki and Konoha but also brought change to Fear's feelings inside. Hence, simply recalling the scene like now was making her heart pound uncontrollably. It was producing a feeling of "I must do something to compete." Like an obsessive-compulsive disorder, something in her

heart was violently urging her—Hurry, hurry, hurry and do something! Make him feel aware of you!

Of course, the first method that occurred to her was to repeat what Konoha had done. However, merely the thought of herself doing that—

(Nu... Nuuuuuuuu...!)

Her head felt like it was about to explode. Consequently, she decided to shelve the idea. Originally, she wanted to hold a grand celebration for Haruaki as a sort of prelude to occupy her thoughts in the meantime, but as soon as this idea took off, she was met with a heavy setback.

But this could not be helped. It would be totally not worth it if she did something he disliked and got hated for it. Slumping her shoulders, Fear said:

"Sigh... Perhaps he might even get annoyed if I gave him a present...? Would it be safer to skip the present...?"

"No no no, Ficchi, you're overthinking things! You have to give a present at least!"

"Really~?"

"I don't think Haru hates receiving presents either. We give him presents every year too. If you skip on the present, Ficchi, you won't be able to draw attention to your presence! The present is absolutely necessary!"

"Hmm... I guess that's true, if you say so. I need to give a present at least, yeah!"

Having said that, Kuroe exhaled as though greatly relieved. Then the remaining issue was—

"What should I give as a present? This is killing my brain."

"I'm racking my brain, trying to think of what to give this year too~ But there's always the last resort, just tie a ribbon around yourself."

"What's the meaning of that?"

"Hoho... This cannot be explained by the lips of your humble servant. You shall understand eventually one day, my lord."

Kuroe returned to her historical drama tone of voice and snickered malevolently. How mind-boggling.

"Anyway, you must figure out what to give before that day arrives. Hmm, I guess there's always the method of asking him directly what he'd like."

"Hmm..."

Fear started to eat rice crackers again, spacing out while staring at the garden ahead.

Haruaki's birthday. Exams. All sorts of random things. There was so much to think about.

It looked like these troublesome days were going to persist for the next while.

Part 3

Several days had passed since Konoha returned home.

Probably thanks to the enhanced healing effects induced by Kuroe's hair, Haruaki's shoulder wound had recovered to the point where he could just about get through life normally. It was still slightly painful, but at least he no longer needed to keep his arm immobilized.

At school, he had explained to Taizou and the others that "I got slightly injured" with his arm tied up, but ever since the sling was taken off, life pretty much went on the same as before. Neither was he prevented from taking notes in class... Still, writing was a tough task but now was not the time to be spacing out instead of copying notes.

Indeed, it was currently exam week. A student's duty was to study. Now that normal life had returned, it was necessary to pour all energy and gather full concentration for the imminent exams. Hence—

The Haruaki household had also invited guests for tonight to hold a group study session. Since Shiraho and others had declined the invitation, only one guest ended up coming. Therefore, in other words, this turned into a "group study session with a private tutor."

"Hey hey, Kirika, what does this mean?"

"Where, where... This part? This is—"

Haruaki looked up and stole a glance at her face.

He caught the side view of Kirika's face while she was explaining key points to Fear. Long eyelashes, well-shaped lips, gentle tone of voice. Feeling embarrassed somehow, Haruaki instantly turned his gaze back to his notes.

But unlike Haruaki, there was one other person present who kept staring intently at Kirika.

"Stare~"

Kirika seemed to endure it uncomfortably for quite a while, but probably reaching her limit, she looked up with what appeared to be a troubled and embarrassed expression.

"Umm—How should I address you...? Honatsu... -san? Umm, it's a bit difficult for me to concentrate if you keep staring at me like this..."

"Hmm~ I knew it, children who are good at studying are lovely~ They feel so reliable, it's great~"

"Uh... Yes..."

Sorry for being so unreliable. Grumbling inside, Haruaki looked to the side of the table at the same time. Sitting there doing nothing was Honatsu, still in that

mysterious female form. He was smiling while supporting his chin on a hand, watching them study. To be honest, he was quite an eyesore.

On the other hand, Kirika simply kept repeatedly retracting her neck with a troubled look on her face. Given the mysterious person who was both an unfamiliar woman and allegedly Haruaki's father at the same time... Kirika probably had no idea how to deal with her.

As a side note, Haruaki had already made his decision not to care. Konoha and the other girls also seemed to have reached the same conclusion. After all, no matter how they tried to ask him why he had transformed into a woman, he would always change the subject and refuse to explain. Hence, there was nothing they could do but accept "that's the way he is," almost to the point of ignoring him. Since he refused to explain, that just let him be. Conversely, Haruaki was neither going to ask nor take any action, letting him do whatever he wanted for now.

"How rude, Haruaki-kun's grades aren't bad at all. Isn't that so?"

Studying together, Konoha voiced her support for Haruaki, but—

"Not particularly good either..."

Haruaki did not really feel like prolonging the subject. He did not really want contact with his father. For him right now, over there was just an incarnation of shame, incomprehension and trouble.

Hence, Haruaki made an ambiguously pleasing smile in an attempt to end the conversation. Then he realized the teacup in his hand happened to be empty.

"Hmm, the tea is finished. The teapot is almost emptied, right? Let me go prepare more—"

"Oh, I already asked Kotetsu just now if preparing tea is what's needed."

Before Haruaki could get up, almost simultaneously while Konoha was speaking, the living room's sliding door was opened.

"...The tea is ready."

A gruff voice and slightly vicious eyes. This was apparently his natural look rather than an indication of poor mood. Appearing from behind with a tray carrying the spare teapot, Kotetsu casually set down the tray next to the table before picking up a cup from the tray and nimbly sitting down in formal seiza behind Konoha in a very natural manner.

"Thank you. You may relax and take a break too."

"...Yes."

Kotetsu gave a brief response then picked up a cup by his side with a serious look on his face. Sucking through a straw in the cup, he drank with a "slurp~"

As for the red liquid he was drinking—

Tomato juice.

(Hmm... This really looks like a scene from one of those common vampire manga... But if this is what stabilizes his mental state, whatever goes.)

For the sake of convenience, Kotetsu's current owner was Haruaki. Although Kotetsu was extremely reluctant, under Konoha's forceful commands, he had no choice but to relent, thus resulting in the current state of affairs. Consequently, the legendary curse of "Kotetsu thirsts for blood tonight"—"compelling the wielder to allow Kotetsu's blade to drink fresh blood"—no longer activated.

However, just as "seeing blood" carried special significance to Konoha, Kotetsu's traits, or rather, his habits, also left behind a reliance on the act of "drinking blood." In order to solve this problem, after going through many failed experiments, they finally discovered that principle that "his heart would calm down as long as he drank a red liquid of similar color." Among them the most effective was tomato juice—So the cliched model passed down from long ago really had its merits?

In any case, Kotetsu was currently very well-behaved. This was probably thanks to Konoha who had been living together with him so far? Although he was still an enemy not too long ago, it felt like there was no need to keep him under heavy supervision at all times. At this rate, he very well might become someone akin to Konoha's little brother, settling down in this home.

However, Haruaki still did not know if Kotetsu really wanted to have his curse lifted.

Although it was mostly Konoha who interacted with Kotetsu at the moment, Haruaki believed that eventually, he must ask Kotetsu directly what were his true thoughts.

Anyway, Kotetsu had brought in tea with perfect timing. Without needing Haruaki to do anything, the previous topic of conversation was swept aside. In other words, he did not need to speak to his father. Picking up the teapot to pour another cup of tea, Haruaki started studying again. There were precious few days before the exams and time must not be wasted...

(Oh right, speaking of time...)

Some time had passed since the previous incident, but no more weird people had appeared so far—Haruaki thought.

Back when Satsuko and Fourteen made their departure, they had apparently said something horrifying but it must have been a mistake. Even if they were serious at the time, it was possible that the situation had changed in the meantime, or perhaps simply because her superior was defeated, Satsuko wanted to scare them in revenge and lied as a result.

(Hmm, it's really great that nothing's happening... Anyway, now's the time for studying. Study.)

Honatsu was smiling while watching the study session, Fear was groaning while reading textbooks, Kirika was tending to Fear, Konoha was studying at her own pace while paying attention to Haruaki's progress once in a while, Kotetsu was

drinking tomato juice in small sips behind Konoha, whereas Haruaki was slightly distracted—

At this moment, Kuroe came home from work, thus the usual members of the group were all gathered.

"I'm home~ Oh, everyone's studying."

"Oh, welcome back, Kuroe. Did you buy what I wrote in the text message?"

"Tomato juice for Kotecchan and milk? Of course. I'll put them in the fridge first."

After entering the kitchen, Kuroe sat down in the living room and began to sip hot tea from the teacup she had brought out.

"Hmm~ So this is the joy of working... Tea tastes best after a hard day's of work."

"Speaking of which, I've heard that you've been working very seriously of late. Well done, Kuroe-kun."

Kirika suddenly stopped writing and spoke whereas Kuroe puffed out her tiny chest as though going "ehe."

"That's right! It's because I have to recover my black hair as quickly as possible~ Only a bit more and I'll have recovered the original hair color completely."

Kuroe picked up her hair in her fingertips and explained. The lock of hair had used up its life force to heal Haruaki's injury, turning snow-white as a side effect. Immediately after the treatment, the white hair was ten centimeters long but now the length was roughly that of a fingernail's. Kuroe was working seriously as hard as she could—That was probably for replenishing life force from the hair that was cut from her customers.

Haruaki thanked her from the bottom of his heart while at the same time, he noticed Konoha suddenly lowering her gaze, burying herself in her notebook. Without saying a word, she looked like she had decided to accept everything.

With slight gloom and helplessness in her eyes, her expression also seemed to be smiling faintly as well.

Indeed, the direct reason why Kuroe needed to use her power beyond her limit and heal Haruaki's wound was because—

The one who had cut open his flesh was—

(Konoha...)

Haruaki himself did not mind but even having said that, it would not make her feel more at ease.

"Oh right! Actually, I've been developing new moves using spare time when business is slow!"

Kuroe was speaking with unnecessary cheerfulness in her voice, possibly because she noticed Konoha's appearance. Konoha tilted her head and asked:

"New moves...? Haven't you been developing them whenever you have time?"

"Yeah, I've watched scenes when you're developing new moves. They're totally terrifying."

"Hoho! But this time, it's beyond the level of thinking up move names. How should I put it? Such as hair control and life force usage or stuff like that, I've come up with totally new ideas. I was wondering if my powers ended up growing due to overusing them at one point? Like that super famous warrior race whose members get stronger every time they approach the verge of death!"

"Oh..."

Konoha tilted her head to the other side, at a loss for words. In any case, Kuroe had apparently succeeded in dispelling her gloomy feelings. Then sipping tea, Kuroe said:

"Hmm, anyway, between working and developing new moves, my days have been very fulfilling lately."

"Oh... Well, as long as you're happy."

"So true, work is very important, you know~? Well done!"

Honatsu stroked Kuroe's head from behind. You, the one who looks he's never working seriously, have the least right to say that—Haruaki could only grumble in his heart.

Then after the studying persisted for a while—

"So... Let's call it a day here. It's getting late."

The group study session was dismissed after Kirika said that. Sighing inside, Haruaki cleared away the paper and stationery used for studying. At this moment, Kirika spoke up while likewise putting textbooks and other belongings away.

"Excuse me... Honatsu-san, I've got something to ask you."

"Ask me? Yes, sure, go ahead."

"Recently, Honatsu-san, why did you observe this home from outside instead of coming in? Since it's your own home, I would think it's fine to return as soon as you could, right?"

Kirika was referring to the time when they were undergoing special training in order to bring Konoha back. They originally thought the mysterious woman appearing in front of the residence's entrance belonged to the Draconians, but it turned out to be a misunderstanding.

"Hmm~ I did consider pressing the doorbell, yes. But anyway, it's because the situation looked very serious."

"That day was... Muu. I went *there* and Kuroe also... Hmm, it was definitely quite serious, I guess."

"Exactly, I did observe the mood first~ So that's why I told myself, I'd better stay at a hotel for now!"

"I see."

In contrast to the words in her response, the look on Kirika's face was not quite convinced. Even after packing all the stationery she had been using for studying into her schoolbag, she did not stand up. Sitting there formally in seiza for quite a while, with eyes closed, she seemed to be contemplating. Then when she opened both eyes—

"Although this might be meddling on my part in an absolutely ridiculous way... There's one more thing."

Kirika shifted her gaze away from Honatsu, looking at Haruaki for an instant. Haruaki felt his heart rate rising because he originally thought the topic of conversation had nothing to do with him. Kirika immediately turned her gaze back to Honatsu.

"In other words, Yachi—kun and you. The way I see it, there was no eye contact between the two of you today, not even once. I believe this is quite abnormal."

"Hmm~ But I was looking at him frequently, because I'd like to record my beloved son's development firmly on the back of my eyes! But Haruaki won't even look at me~ Are you shy?"

Of course. Not. Like hell I'd look. This overly inexplicable Pops. The Pops who refused to explain anything.

Kirika seemed to sigh.

"I can understand how he feels. If I were him, I would've done the same. As much as I hate using that particular word, however—*It's very unpleasant when forced to let an unknown persist as an unknown.*"

"I know a little bit about you. That used to be your former standpoint, right?"

"No, trying to thoroughly unearth unnecessary secrets is completely different from being forced to pretend not to see a mystery that's right in front of your eyes."

Kirika straightened her back forcefully and spoke like a judge delivering a verdict:

"Please tell us. What have you been doing all this time? Why did you end up looking like this? What are your plans for the future? Unless these questions are cleared up, your relationship with Yachi will never become normal. Naturally, the same applies to your relationship with us as well."

Haruaki did not look at Honatsu's face, but did not look away either—He simply kept his attention on Honatsu's person. This was to know how would he answer? What kind of expression would he make? Nevertheless, the nervous tension at the scene did not last long. Bringing his hands together with a clap, Honatsu tilted his head apologetically and said:

"Oh dear~ ...I understand how you all feel but I'm sorry~ Because if I explain now, it'll take double the effort..."

Shock, anger, disappointment, scorn. These emotions rushed into Haruaki's brain accompanied by dizziness. He secretly gnashed his teeth. As expected, this really was the worst father!

However, Honatsu's answer seemed to have raised a new question from Fear.

"What do you mean by taking double the effort?"

"Hmm~ Of course, it's not like I don't want to explain to you all. It's just that it's a lot of work if I need to repeat the same explanation multiple times, so I want to wait until Gab-chan returns before I explain."

"Gab-chan...?"

"After letting my little gray cells to spin at full speed, I'm guessing that's the superintendent."

"That's right~ That child still seems to be running around the world, right? I've heard that he's away somewhere even now. But I've already contacted him and heard that he's returning to Japan after your exams are over. Since I want to

explain everything in person to my good friend, that will be the time when I'll answer everyone's questions together!"

After saying that, he even winked. That extremely fluid, natural and flawless winking motion, like a young wife appearing in an advertisement, actually made others feel very uncomfortable.

"By the way, it's fine if you want to address Haruaki without honorifics like earlier. Just now, you originally wanted to call him Yachi directly, right? I hope you can behave with your true selves like normal~ Because this might very well be related to my son's future, I want to observe this area properly too~"

"F-Future...!"

As though sunk by a great impact, Kirika went red in the face and bowed her head.

Haruaki exchanged glances with Fear and the others, sighing.

In the end, Honatsu still had no intentions of disclosing everything about himself at the moment. But now that a deadline had been set at the end of exams, there was some progress at least. It was all thanks to Kirika.

However, in spite of that...

(...I hope he really does explain everything in detail before the superintendent.)

Of course—inside Haruaki's heart, he had already become thoroughly unable to trust his father's words.

Part 4

"Well then—Goodbye."

"Thanks a lot, Class Rep."

"See you, Kirika!"

Kirika closed the front door behind her. Maintaining this posture, she recalled that face of his, still bidding goodbye to her only an instant earlier. Slightly apologetic—on a true level, a gaze that was not looking at her. Physically, in terms of angles, he was definitely looking at her, but the focus of his heart was not in focus. He was afraid of focusing on her.

(Absolutely... ridiculous...)

She understood very clearly why. With too much happening all at once, the stress in his heart must be reaching a limit.

Kirika sighed lightly and released the front door's handle, then took a step forward. Taking out her cellphone absentmindedly, she checked the time. What her eyes focused on was not the time of the day displayed but the date.

As the numbers grew bigger and bigger, the circled dates on the calendar in her mind were going to arrive in succession. First were the midterm exams. Continuing to study hard at the current rate, yes, she should be able to attain her usual grades. Then right after that, awaiting her was the important event—

(Birthday... huh?)

Since birthdays happened once a year, Kirika had experienced Haruaki's birthday last year as well. However, she did not recall doing anything special, because she knew that Haruaki wanted to spend his birthdays in peace. She had also heard about the reason—but was not sure whether it was brought up by himself or by Taizou and Kana during chatting. This, she could not remember exactly.

She traced back her memories that were fuzzy to an unbelievable degree. On that day last year, what had she bought? She seemed to have gave him something boring at school. Of course, it was together with Kana and the others. Then after school, they had taken a group picture at a photo booth to commemorate, followed by buying snacks to eat together. That was all she could recall.

Suddenly, she was captured by a strange feeling. For herself back then, the boy named Yachi Haruaki was definitely just a target for observation. She was still

part of the Lab Chief's Nation at the time whereas he was nothing more than a boy whose constitution was immune to curses.

Ah—At which point in time had she fallen in love with him?

She felt like there was no clear trigger. Naturally, very naturally, by the time she realized, her gaze was already chasing after him. She was only observing him because she was ordered to observe him—She had also used the operation itself as an excuse.

This year, she was welcoming his birthday for the first time after realizing her own feelings.

The situation was different, she could not allow things to go as last year. She had already confessed. Although there were still many worrisome aspects regarding the answer, her current priority was choosing a gift in any case. What should she choose? What would serve as a present?

Right—For example, most typically, she had often heard others say that wrapping yourself up as a present was the best way to express your feelings—

"A-Absolutely ridiculous...!"

She hastily shook her head hard, stuffed the cellphone into her skirt pocket and started walking. There was quite some distance between the front door of the Yachi main residence and the entrance to the premises. She decided to slowly walk the dozen of steps required to cover this path. Right now, that was what she really felt like doing.

One step. She walked on the stepping stone underfoot. Another step.

At this moment, lively noise came from the main house behind her. Did Fear or Kuroe cause a commotion? Was Konoha being angry? Did the newcomer Kotetsu do something wrong? Were Honatsu and Haruaki the father and son pair having an argument—If that were the case, things would actually be more normal.

In any case, it was very lively. The noise behind her back, transmitting into the distance.

Meanwhile, the path ahead was very quiet. As soon as she exited the main entrance, a quiet night road awaited her, leading to the total darkness of her own apartment.

Kirika looked back slightly, narrowing her eyes lightly. The lively Yachi home. The happy Yachi home.

She could not help but indulge in pointless imagination.

Suppose, suppose she could also live there—

(...No, that... would be asking for too much. I...)

Kirika shook her head lightly and faced forward again.

Then leaving behind the lively noise of the Yachi home, she started along her dark path back home.

Part 5

Inside a room with the lights turned off—

Having spent a number of days to prepare herself, Fear finally decided to do it.

She was squirming awkwardly. Due to closing her eyes, she could not see anything so she only turned her head. She had definitely taken a bath already and even scrubbed especially hard. There were no odors or stains on her body... Probably, definitely. Had she forgotten to do anything else? Would it be better to brush her teeth beforehand as well?

"Okay, so, Fear... May I open you up?"

"Y-You must be more gentle, also, don't keep staring the whole time!"

"I know, it's just the same as always."

The same as always. Indeed, just the same as always. This kind of thing had happened many times by this point. Purely letting Haruaki see her most important part, feeling his breath blowing on her body, shivering from the touch of his fingers, then having him insert *that* into that extremely tight opening of hers, all the way into the very depths. Nothing more than that.

However—Right now, her heart was beating faster than usual.

She knew why. It was due to her feelings. Because placing herself in Haruaki's hands—let alone fear, she felt tender affection instead. She wished for him to touch her. Like this, touch her more. That being said, she was too embarrassed to voice any of this at all.

"Mmm, ah...!"

"Sorry, does it hurt?"

"No... It doesn't."

Under the illumination of the flashlight in Haruaki's hand, her private spot was exposed and completely laid bare. This could not be helped because visibility was necessary, but it did produce a sense of immorality instead. Fear thought to herself: very shameless indeed. Haruaki definitely enjoyed this kind of thing, because he was staring into the deepest part of her with such serious eyes. This guy was hopeless. Even if one were to search the entire world, there was very likely no woman but herself who was generous and tolerant enough to allow Haruaki to stare at that kind of spot. Hence, she was special to him.

"Okay, so... I'm putting it in."

"...Sure."

Haruaki presumably thought it would be a bad idea to insert suddenly. Fear felt his fingers gently caressing her opening. Her consciousness shuddered. Biting her nonexistent lips, she desperately suppressed the lame cry that almost escaped. Idiot, what are you trying to do! I'll curse you! That feels too pleasurable—It makes me feel like there's an electrical current running through my entire body!

"I'm putting it in here."

"That's... Hurry and put it in... Don't move... your fingers back and forth..."

Haruaki replied "understood." Fear took a breath in then held it. She could sense him inhaling as well. Then immediately—

"...!"

There was a feeling of something inserting into her body. The sensation of a foreign object only lasted an instant before turning into "something that belonged inside as a matter of fact," melding into one with the contours within her body.

Inside her body, the most sensitive spot was getting filled. However—

"It's not... over, right...?"

"Yeah, one more time. I'm going to do it in one go next."

"Mmmkuh—!"

The same feeling arose at a different spot from just now. A sense of insertion occurred at two places simultaneously. A numbing feeling ran through her entire body, intermediate between a tickling and a painful sensation. However, these feelings gained significance as soon as it crossed her mind that they came by his hand. Like evidence, like bonds.

When the rich sense of fulfillment enveloped her, he started to clean up indifferently. She felt a bit offended. Of course it was necessary to cover up her exposed private spot, but there was no need to hurry so much, right?

"Uh... I need to do this here then do that... Is this okay? Although it's the same as usual, let me know if your body feels uncomfortable anywhere, okay? Then I'm off."

"W-Wait, it just so happens that I want to chat with you for a bit. Turn around and wait for me."

After confirming that Haruaki had obeyed her directions despite showing signs of puzzlement, Fear turned back to human form. Although the room was very dark, she must not be careless. Anyway, she fidgeted while putting on the shirt she had removed then reached out to find the panties that ought to be nearby while speaking:

"Then uh... Basically that, I've got something to ask you."

"Sure, what is it?"

"Well, just as you know, I still have many things I don't understand about the human world. So, to be honest, I don't think I understand events like birthdays very well yet."

"Oh... That's not a particularly important day, so it's fine even if you don't do anything."

A ready answer within expectations. Fear felt a little sad but it could not be helped.

"No, I've talked to Kuroe and reached the conclusion that presents must be given at least. So I'll ask you honestly, do you have anything you'd like?"

During breaks between studying for exams, she had been racking her brain on this issue but could not reach an answer. Hence, she decided to go with Kuroe's suggestion of going straight to the point. Although this was not the best method, at least it was better than helplessly delaying until the day itself.

"I clearly said it doesn't matter already..."

Inside the dark room, Fear sensed a forced smile. Having grown accustomed to the darkness, she could faintly see Haruaki's back quivering slightly, sitting in front of her. By the way, she still had not found her panties. Where had they gone?

Fear got on her knees and circled the surroundings, patting the floor with her palms in her continued search.

"That's not acceptable. Don't worry, just go ahead and tell me."

"Really... I'm fine with anything."

That's really giving me a headache—Fear thought. She did not have too much money, with only a little left over from the part-time jobs in the past. What should she buy? Buying something cheaper would be forgivable, given the circumstances. Then how about changing her idea slightly to give something that were not sold in common shops? Something she could prepare. Something she—could give.

Speaking of which—Fear recalled it. Kuroe had said "there's always the last resort, just tie a ribbon around yourself." This had not registered in her mind at the time because she did not understand, but now—after thinking about it while alone with Haruaki in a dark room—Fear suddenly figured out what it meant.

(Too—! Too shameless...!)

Her cheeks instantly heated up. What the heck? Was that really okay? As long as the other side demanded it? Also, where on earth were her panties?

"...By the way, you've been rummaging for a while now. What are you looking for?"

"Hmm, wawawa?"

Her hand suddenly slipped on something while she was supporting herself on her arm, sending her body forward, causing her to end up hugging Haruaki who was turning his head back.

"Woah!"

"Wah! Umm, sorry!"

Her heart was pounding. She could feel Haruaki's warmth from the body she was hugging in the darkness. Haruaki's hand also ended up on her head by chance. As though stroking her head, he started to move his palm.

"Back to the subject just now. Haven't I repeated this many times? It's great that you're trying hard to do good things like an ordinary person, but you don't need to rush. So, anything's fine as long as it's a gift from you. I'm very happy already from your feelings, so I definitely have no complaints."

"A-Anything's fine? Y-You, I knew it...!"

Just as Fear frantically pushed herself up—

Click! The room's light was switched on.

"Hoa!?"

Haruaki made a strange cry and turned his head. His gaze was directly at the room's opened sliding door, Konoha, who was just pressing the light switch. As though attached to her, Kotetsu was also by her side.

Meanwhile, Haruaki was sitting in the room cross-legged with Fear pressed up against him and her hand on his knee for support. Haruaki's hand was on her head while she was only dressed in a shirt. There was even a pair of panties in her hand. She had slipped just now due to grabbing the pair of panties, but forgot to wear them.

"No wait, this is a misunderstanding! Konoha, this is—!"

Haruaki panicked while Fear also panicked as well.

Unexpectedly, Konoha simply smiled. She did not anger at the indecent scene before her eyes. Neither did she leak out sword energy to destroy the wall or the pillar touching her hands.

"The bathroom is unoccupied, Haruaki-kun. So please take your bath now."

"I... got it..."

"Fear-san, what's with the way you're dressed? You just took a bath, didn't you? If you stay so lightly dressed, be careful or you'll catch a cold."

"Y-Yes...?"

Although it was a warning, Konoha was still smiling without showing any anger.

Then immediately, Konoha swiftly turned around and left. Kotetsu also narrowed his eyes and swept his gaze around the room before following her matter-of-factly.

Fear blinked and exchanged stares with Haruaki silently.

She believed that the two of them were feeling the same thing.

What to do? The fact that Konoha did not act scary actually made them feel extremely scared.

Part 6

Frankly speaking, it was difficult to understand.

"Is this really alright? Muramasa-sama, you love that man, don't you?"

Hence, Kotetsu asked candidly upon returning to the room. Though a room, this was not the place allotted to him as his bedroom (which was a room filled with random articles, supposedly used almost as a storeroom), instead, it was the room inhabited by the senior Japanese sword whom he admired.

After repeated contemplation, Kotetsu decided to interact with her for now in the same manner as earlier—in other words, back when they were living together with his former master. This was because the "her" back then was also included in "her" current self. This fact was already indisputable.

Naturally, there were times when he felt that her image did not quite match, while on other occasions, it matched quite well. But he had already accepted things. It was fine even if this was the case. All he needed to do was do some thinking whenever her image did not match. He did not change his manner of addressing her either. She had apparently been quite opposed so far to others addressing her as Muramasa, but in the end, she said: "Whatever, that's who I am after all."

Hence she permitted him to call her that—Back at the time, Yachi Haruaki even made a look of surprise, so this was probably some sort of change for her.

In any case, Muramasa Konoha was sitting on her usual seat cushion while grinning slightly wryly as she answered his question:

"Indeed that is true. Is it very odd?"

"Yes. Truth be told, it perplexes me greatly why you have not punished them."

As though showing off her calm composure, she chuckled "ufufu" after speaking, her shoulders shaking in laughter.

"Actually—This is strategy."

"Strategy...?"

"Indeed. If I were my old self, surely I would have punished me just now. I would have pulled them apart by force as well to give them a good lecturing. However, that stage is already past. Right now, I've entered a new stage where I must attack with a different feeling from before."

"Yes..." Kotetsu had no choice but to answer ambiguously.

"I've already confessed so there is no need to be impatient. Instead, I believe that now is the time to display calm composure. Boys don't like girls who get angry all the time, right? I must show him how open-minded and generous I am to distinguish myself from my rivals. That's the course of action I believe I ought to be taking right now."

"In other words, in order to leave an impression of forgiving lenience in his heart, you suppressed your anger earlier and deliberately refrained from punishing them?"

"That's precisely the idea. Furthermore, I know that they were just inserting Indulgence Disks back then. It's all that child's fault for being clumsy and

unguarded all the time, resulting in accidents like those. I was not suppressing anything at all, ahaha!"

Since she was saying this with a smile, then what she had been doing all this time after sitting down on the cushion—using chopping motions from her right hand to shred a newspaper that she had rolled up with her left hand, slicing it finely in midair—was definitely not a sign of suppression. Working hard without relaxing to maintain a true Japanese sword's sharpness... This must be some kind of slicing exercise far more profound than the likes of him could understand. Probably.

Thinking he must seek her guidance on this matter eventually, Kotetsu decided to watch silently for now and not disturb her. First, he should secretly learn by watching. That was often how mysteries of an art were mastered.

"By the way—Kotetsu, what are your thoughts on birthdays?"

She glanced at him and asked.

"You mean the matter of celebrating birthdays? I have no thoughts at all. Because celebrating birthdays according to the solar year is a Western European custom. Naturally, during the times when I recognized my masters, they counted their age using traditional East Asian age reckoning."

"You have a point~"

"Are you referring to that guy's birthday?"

"Indeed! This is the matter at hand..."

After shredding the newspaper in her left hand completely, she collapsed forward, dropping her upper torso onto the floor with a thud and burying her palms in the remains of the newspaper. She was pushing the pieces randomly about as though enjoying the feeling while murmuring emphatically to the floor.

"Ah—This is the first birthday after I confessed and became a brand new me. I must confer special meaning upon this day. It would be best if I could take this

opportunity to hear his answer. However, what will actually happen? Am I being too impatient? What should I give as a present? Hmm~... Hmm~..."

Starting from some point in time, she was pointing her index finger at the floor, stirring the newspaper pieces as though drawing circles on the floor. Presumably slowly getting excited from just her own murmuring, her voice began to carry an odd fervor while the speed of her stirring motion kept increasing. In order to disguise her shyness, the newspaper was repeatedly getting shredded.

"A special... present. But I get the feeling that Haruaki-kun most likely would say that just having me is enough... Having me... is enough...? Giving a present that "has me"? In other words, something like a "do-as-you-please coupon"? Given such a coupon, Haruaki-kun definitely won't forget what will happen next... Kyah! Oh no, isn't that truly progressing too quickly? But, but it might not be too fast, right? After all, I've been enduring for so long, ehehe, ehehehehe..."

This behavior, on the other hand, was clearly not part of a Japanese sword's training. The Japanese sword he idolized was lying on the floor uncouthly, twisting this way and that due to her own imagination.

Kotetsu partially narrowed his eyes as he watched, sighing secretly.

There was apparently something he must do.

Why? Of course, it was for the happiness of her whom he revered. Hence—

(No helping it... As much as I am reluctant.)

Naturally, Kotetsu had no choice apart from carrying out the task.

Part 7

Today was reaching an end after a full day of diligent studying. This was the normal life that kept repeating over the past few days.

However, one additional event happened before the night was out.

"Hmmmmmm... Hmm?"

The instant he turned in bed, Haruaki felt that something was not right under the covers. This prompted his consciousness to leave through the exit of the dream world. Instantly, Haruaki recalled what happened a few days earlier—in other words, when Konoha had squeezed herself into his bed. He became wide awake at once. No way! Staring wide-eyed, he flipped over the blanket—

"What!?"

Not the same as last time. The person before his eyes—was not Konoha but Kotetsu.

Usually, Kotetsu slept in Konoha's pajamas but that was not the case this time. Haruaki did not know if Kotetsu had borrowed this from Konoha as well, or found it somewhere else in the house on his own, but Kotetsu was dressed in the kind of flimsy kimono nightwear seen in historical dramas, tied only by a tiny sash at the waist.

Kotetsu was maintaining a posture on all fours right beside Haruaki. Illuminated under the moonlight scattering inside the room, Kotetsu's pale neck and a large part of his chest was exposed from under the sagging neckline of his nightwear.

"W-What...!?"

Kotetsu even leaned himself forward, bringing his face close to Haruaki. Under the moonlight, only now did Haruaki see his face clearly. Kotetsu's expression was clearly very embarrassed but also extremely serious.

"What do... you want...?"

"I know."

"K-Know what...?"

"—You failed to make a move despite the seductive temptations of a woman like Muramasa-sama. Truth be told, I found that attitude of yours quite suspicious. However, if there is any reason for that... Only one answer is possible. In other words, you're one of those, right?"

"One of those!?"

Kotetsu leaned his body closer to Haruaki as though saying "just give up," glaring at him sideways.

"I have already come to know... *You have a preference for pederasty*, don't you? With that, everything makes sense."

"Wha—!?"

Pederasty, male homosexuality, the Way of the Young—All sorts of knowledge from dictionaries rapidly spun in Haruaki's mind while he entered a state of total confusion. But now was not the time to be confused! How did this happen? He must explain quickly! Haruaki barely managed to rein in his thoughts—

"No no no, hold on! This is a misunderstanding! A very serious misunderstanding!"

"No need to make excuses. Indeed... This too... cannot be helped."

"Wha?"

"—Muramasa-sama's happiness is my happiness. Hence, let us make a deal."

"A-A deal...?"

Haruaki repeated those words, prompting Kotetsu to pause in hesitation.

"Indeed. In other words, well..."

Then after squirming awkwardly for a while—

Kotetsu loosened the sash at his waist.

The kimono fell open to the sides, exposing even more of that snow-white surface of the skin.

"W-What are you doing!?"

"...Allow me to be the one to take upon your lust."

"Huh—!?"

"Consequently, you must treat Muramasa-sama gently. This is the deal. You may toy with my body as you please but conversely, you must pour your full attention into bringing happiness to her—"

"Honestly, you've totally lost me!"

Kotetsu's front torso was completely exposed. The fallen nightwear was also draped over Haruaki, the sensation of its sheer fabric passing onto him. I must break free no matter what! Just as Haruaki tried to turn around, Kotetsu's arms moved even faster, grabbing Haruaki's wrists and securing them above his head. Then immediately, Kotetsu swiftly straddled Haruaki.



Leaning forward again, Kotetsu drew his face near. His breathing was even faster than before. His eyes were moist.

"...Give up... Do you think you can win... against me in strength...?"

"NO——!?"

Indeed, Haruaki knew very clearly that he could not win in strength against Kotetsu, but he still had to resist as hard as he could. He struggled in a mad frenzy. Although Kotetsu's grip did not loosen, Haruaki's efforts were not in vain.

"Hawah! T-Too too too too too shameless! Absolutely shameless to the extreme! I'll curse you!"

"Whoosh! A swift arrival! Keeping the camera always charged at 100% is my principle!"

Discovering the commotion, Fear and Kuroe pulled open the room's sliding door at some point in time. Fear kept waving her Rubik's cube around in shock while Kuroe held her digital camera in excitement. In addition—Konoha was present, of course.

In line with her recent mode of behavior, she remained smiling even in the face of this situation. Smiling. However—

"..."

Somehow, Haruaki could see an overwhelming "rumbling" aura behind her. How nostalgic.

"Aha. Haha! If. Both. Boys—How truly easy~ it is to... surpass the limits of my tolerance—!"

"Wow, this feels like it's been a long time since—Now's not the time to be saying this!"

"Damn you, shameless brat, stay there, don't move and watch how I'm gonna teach you a good lesson!"

"As expected of Haru, whose vastness in strike zone is public knowledge. I must add a new category to my records folder."

"Haruaki-kun! This leaves me no choice but to lift my punishment ban! Please prepare yourself well!"

"Hold on, why am I the one getting blamed!? It's Kotetsu who—Huh? Where did he go? Oh, the window!"

"I was looking for a place to get a clear view of the moon but I seem to have gotten lost and ended up somewhere unexpected... However as one would think, a moon viewing is best undertaken outdoors in the garden after all. Excuse me!"

With a fluttering of his nightwear's hem, Kotetsu jumped out the window lightly and fled the scene.

"What a super lame escape! Hold on, Fear, Konoha, you must know that he's the culprit responsible for everything, right? So let me explain from the beginning...!"

"Kotetsu must be punished too, but that is for later! As for now...!"

"That's right, Haruaki, you're first!"

Outside the room filled with noise, showing no late night atmosphere at all...

Honatsu was leaning alone against a pillar in the corridor, quietly observing the situation inside the room.

"Hoho... I see now~ I think I'm quickly getting a grasp of what the usual atmosphere is like in this home."

His attitude was not as happy-go-lucky as usual, but staid like an mature adult's, showing a faint and wry smile while he whispered.

Part 8

Despite all sorts of things happening, the next few days went by.

The midterms were over. To be honest, Haruaki had no confidence in his exam results.

"Ahaha, eh? Did something happen today? The memory of mine, Kana's, is a bit fuzzy. Exams? What is that? Is it some kind of karate yell? Like 'Exams—!' or something like that? Ahaha~"

"This girl is losing it, she's beyond help! By the way, Class Rep, how did you do? What did you write for the answer to the third question? I think I can barely pass as long as I got that question correct!"

While preparing to go home after school, Haruaki's group spent some time exchanging comments with Kana, who was showing an empty look, and Taizou, whose eyes showed urgent fervor. Since Kana and Taizou's club activities were going to resume immediately today, they parted ways here. Just as the group was about to leave the classroom—

"Oh! Shiraho, how did you do?"

"Good grief, how annoying can you get? Just the same as usual, the same as usual. Move aside, I have a date with Sovereignty."

If it's just the same as usual, isn't that quite bad for her? —Haruaki wondered. However, seeing as she attended supplementary lessons as frequently as seasonal traditions, Haruaki decided not to worry about it.

As though following the frowning Shiraho, the whole group made their way to the shoe lockers and encountered a familiar underclassman there. "Oh! Shiraho-san, hope things went well on your exams! Exams ended for the second-years today as well, right? How do you think you did—Pretend I didn't say anything!" Chihaya immediately displayed superb danger evasion before taking out her anger by glaring at Haruaki's group. Like that had anything to do with them.

In any case, the group changed their shoes together with Shiraho and Chihaya who apparently had someone waiting for them outside of school, then they

walked out of the school building. Joining the crowd of students leaving school, they made their way to the school gates.

Then waiting for them there was—

"Sovereignty, sorry for making you wait. Your work has ended for today, yes? Let's go—"

"Isuzu, you didn't cause any weird commotions, right? Then let's hurry and return—"

Shiraho and Chihaya each called out to the one waiting for them, but suddenly stopped talking and tilted their heads in puzzlement, presumably due to noticing something off about those two.

Sovereignty and Isuzu were standing shoulder to shoulder near the school gates, peering outside the premises with troubled expressions on their faces. Sovereignty was dressed in a female uniform for going to school (work?) while Isuzu was in her usual shrine maiden outfit.

"Oh hello Shiraho, Haruaki and everyone else. There seems to be something over there—"

Just as Sovereignty noticed their arrival and greeted them—

"Geh!?"

Haruaki was rendered speechless. Outside the gates, where Sovereignty and Isuzu were staring at, was—

"Oh! Coming, coming! Hey~ Those exams must have been tough~! How did you do? Regardless whether you did well or not, now's the time to be liberated, right? Yay yay~!"

Waving towards him was the father who looked like a woman.

"...What a nightmare..."

Haruaki pressed his palm to his face. Generally speaking, he did not really want his classmates to see his family already, especially now that his father looked like that. If possible, he really wanted to pretend not to see, trying his best to ignore the sight. "Who is that beauty there?" "Must be the mom of someone from that group, right?" "She looks so young, how wonderful~" Haruaki also wanted to do everything he could to escape from this gossiping between the surrounding the students.

With her arms crossed before her chest, Shiraho narrowed her eyes coldly at Haruaki.

"...Is this someone related to you, human? If it really is the friend of a human who engages diligently in shamelessly perverted behavior on a daily basis, that would be truly mortifying."

"Sorry, I can't find any words to refute that. I'd be really grateful if you could ignore this..."

"Oh dear! You finally admitted that you've been engaging diligently in perverted behavior on a daily basis? I recall seeing on television that ordinary citizens have the right to arrest criminals in such situations."

"Hey, stay away from Shiraho-san and me or else we'll get impregnated. Totally disgusting."

"I wasn't agreeing with that part! It's the mortifying bit!"

Haruaki calmed himself and looked forward again. Honatsu was dressed in a cream-colored suit with a light and puffy hairstyle, looking like a young, married and successful career woman, dressed to go out as usual. The only thing different from normal was the light truck she was leaning against. Since the truck was parked right before the school gates, it went without saying that it was causing a lot of trouble. For some reason, the side of the truck was labeled "Yamamoto Liquor Store." Haruaki had a feeling he had seen this name before in the shopping district.

"Hmm?" Fear seemed intrigued by the truck and walked towards Honatsu. Despite his reluctance, Haruaki had no choice but to chase after her. Sovereignty and the others also went with the flow and followed.

"So, what's going on here?"

"Ufufu, I borrowed this~"

"Borrowed...? This is clearly a truck used for a liquor store's business, right? Why?"

Hearing Konoha's question, Honatsu waved his hand and replied:

"About this~ I was walking in the streets, looking for suitable transportation when I happened to see Take-boy from the liquor store sitting in this truck, so I tried whispering in his ear: 'Are you still paying tribute to Miki-chan at the bar? Anyway, forget about that, can I borrow this truck until evening?' For some reason, he agreed to lend it to me very readily~"

Fear narrowed her eyes.

"Hey... Isn't that totally blackmail...?"

"Don't put it like that~ It was just a request, a request. Although he seemed to tremble while answering: 'How do you know that? Who are you? Don't break up my family now, my second child is about to be born!' But it must have been my imagination~"

Haruaki broke out in cold sweat, hoping that the police was not currently going around in search for this vehicle.

"So yeah, now we have transportation, let's go shopping together! Go go—!"

"Huh?"

"W-What are you doing? Wait, don't push my butt!"

Taking Fear by the hand, Honatsu shoved her into the front passenger seat, then forcefully pushed Konoha onto the truck's cargo deck.

"Okay, all of you onto the truck! Let's get on! The more the merrier~ Wow~ All of you are pretty girls! Good job, Haruaki, that's my son!"

"S...on...? Then you're this human's—Ah! Wait, I never said I was going! Don't touch me!"

"I don't really get what's going on, but looks like fun! I'm going too—!"

Seeing Shiraho and Konoha pushed onto the cargo deck, Sovereignty automatically jumped up there too. "If Shiraho-san is going..." As a result, Chihaya and Isuzu boarded the truck as well, leaving Kirika and Haruaki as the only ones remaining. Kirika first glanced at Haruaki from the side then sighed and said to Honatsu while looking at the cargo deck that was not meant for passengers:

"Absolutely ridiculous—Doesn't this violate traffic regulations?"

"Don't sweat the details!"

"And this sudden talk about going shopping, why?"

"Because we're all going out together tomorrow, so we need to make all sorts of preparations~"

"...Tomorrow?"

Haruaki's eyebrow twitched. Looking up, he met gazes with the smiling Honatsu, but not wanting to speak to his father, he fell silent and turned his gaze away. Tomorrow. No way? As much as Haruaki wanted to question his motives, he did not want to speak to Honatsu. Luckily, Kirika voiced Haruaki's thoughts on his behalf.

"That's—because tomorrow is Yachi's birthday?"

Indeed. Haruaki had focused his full attention on exams earlier, avoiding the thought on purpose. Besides, it was meant to be a day that did not matter. The day he disliked. The day when his father would return. The day he returned just for sake of appearances. The day when Haruaki was forced to accommodate his father.

However, Honatsu waved.

"Ah~ Uh, I guess it counts if you put it that way~ But actually, the main reason is not Haruaki's birthday but something else. Still, I can't deny that it did occur to me that it's a rare chance, so we might as well celebrate together as well."

"What do you mean?"

"I've received notice that Gab-chan is finally returning tomorrow from his trip. However, after such a long separation, wouldn't it be very plain and boring to meet a dear friend at home or in the superintendent's office as usual again? So I suggested: 'since it happens to be the holiday after exams, I'd really love to take everyone to a rewarding place~ How about we meet there?' Then he agreed very readily~"

"The superintendent tomorrow..."

Haruaki sensed Kirika's gaze again. Although he did not believe it, this father of his had promised to explain everything in front of the superintendent. Suppose he really was speaking the truth—Perhaps there might be progress after all.

"Going there requires preparations... Which is why we're going shopping? Yachi, what's the plan?"

"I'm already seated here, so let's hurry and set off! Now that I think more carefully, it's my first time riding this type of car, I'm so excited! Also, if possible, I want to try riding in the back on the return trip!"

The silver-haired little lady leaned her upper body out of the front passenger seat's window and kept bouncing around, urging the group to set off.

"Can't be helped... Let's go, Class Rep."

"...I suppose so."

Haruaki climbed up onto the cargo deck on his own. By this point, the gazes of the surrounding students felt extremely stinging.

"Very good, very good! Then everything's okay once we head over to the Dan-no-ura and pick up Kuroe-chan~"

Just as Honatsu was about to get into driver's seat contentedly, Konoha asked with an astonished look:

"So, there is one important question I still haven't asked. Where are we going tomorrow?"

"Mmmfufu, about that~"

Honatsu opened the door on the driver's side and answered while grinning from ear to ear:

"—The beach! I can't believe Gab-chan has a villa there!"

Part 9

The next day, it was the holiday after exams.

Although midsummer was still some time away, the temperature had already become quite warm, so there were quite a few beachgoers visible on the shore. This included Haruaki's group.

(Oh dear...)

Haruaki sighed deeply under the parasol. Turning his head, he saw a building behind him. This brand new building was the villa belonging to the superintendent.

(Although he told us to play first since he was arriving later... I'm totally not in the mood for fun.)

Their current location was the very tip of the beach. Going further would enter the rocky area, virtually at the very end. It was almost as though this villa had been built here just to claim the last stretch of sand before the very end, hence this little corner could pretty much be considered a private beach. Compared to the central part of the beach, there were clearly much fewer beachgoers here, hence it was possible rest and be quite relaxed. Conversely, the vendor stalls and vending machines were much farther away, but that was only reasonable.

However, Haruaki was in no carefree mood to forget everything and have fun. There were many things he needed to think about. After exams, a sense of liberation did rise in his heart but he was not excited enough to enjoy a swim in the ocean from the bottom of his heart.

"What should I say~...?"

Particularly today, there was the additional reason of "his own birthday." Perhaps it was childish defiance, but every year, he would deliberately act very passively. If he were alone, he definitely would have refused to come to the beach on his birthday.

Be that as it may, this time, there was also the objective of listening to his father's explanations together with the superintendent. Apart from that—

"Nuoh! Guwah! What is this? Numomomomo! This feeling under my feet is so strange, heeyeah!? Nuhahaha! It tickles! But so comfortable!"

Seeing Fear running back and forth along the shore, Haruaki suddenly relaxed his cheeks. Naturally, frolicking in the sea was a first experience for Fear. Ever since the moment she heard about the destination yesterday, she was already fiercely exuding an aura of "I really wanna go!" There was no way Haruaki could have given her the cold shoulder.

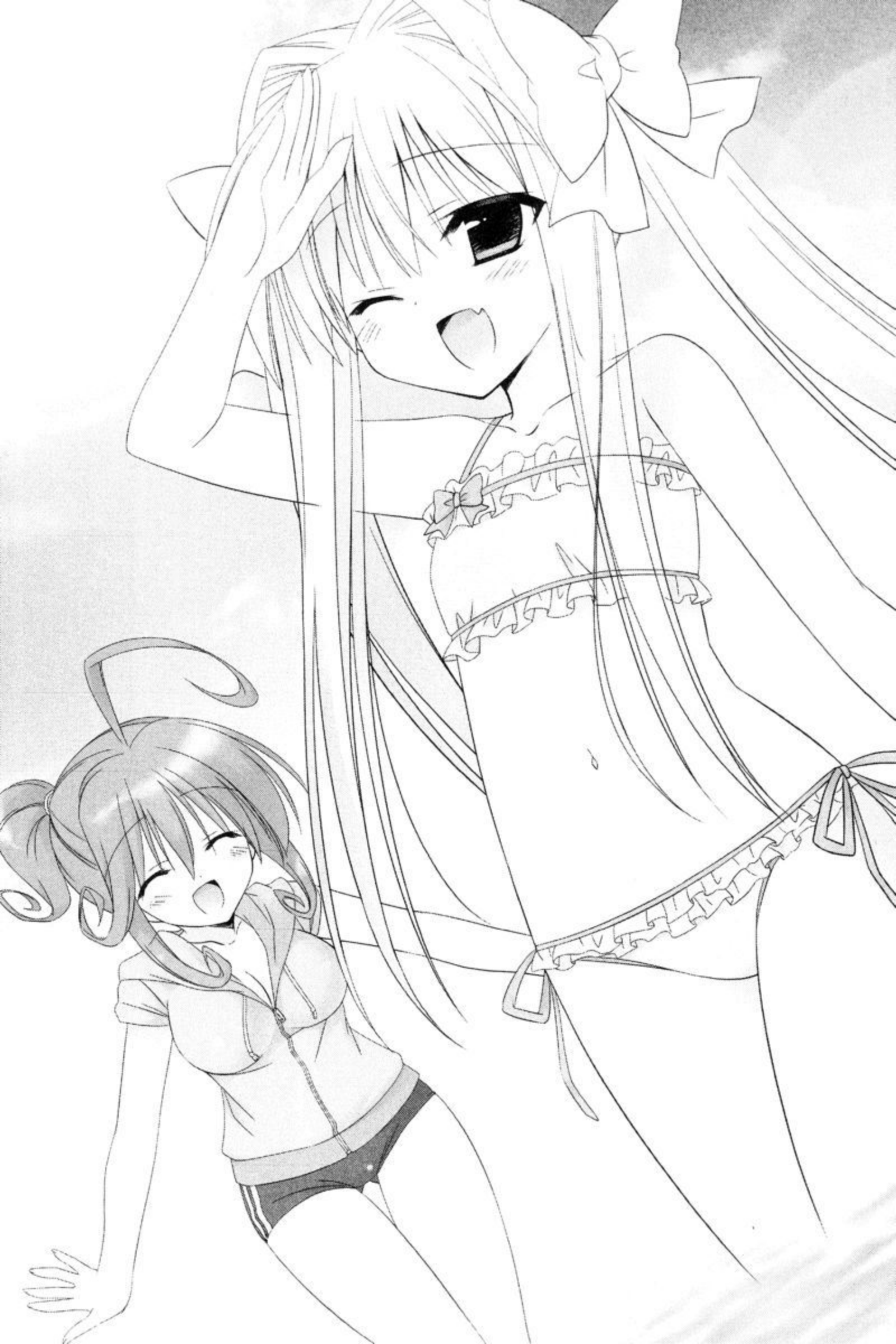
"Another wave is coming~ Then it retreated! Nyufufu, it tickles!"

"Ahaha, I think I'm getting addicted to the feeling of the waves breaking over me. Mmmheehee, so ticklish, hyawah!"

"Nuu, damn you, Sovereignty, you must have deliberately pretended to fall over, but actually, you just wanted to be the first to swim! Don't start gloating yet, I'm not gonna lose to you, watch me dive! I knew it, swimming is the main part of going to the beach, as long as I have this swim ringlug glug glug glug—!"

"Fear-chan!"

Having changed into swimwear, Fear and Sovereignty were playing together. Like a certain visit to the pool last time, Sovereignty was dressed in swimwear that worked for either gender. Instead of the school swimsuit given to her by upperclassmen from the swimming club, Fear was wearing a new swimsuit apparently bought the previous day. Haruaki could not help but admit it was very cute... However, where did she get the money from? Did it come from that bastard Pops? If he had money to throw around like that, Haruaki would rather have him increase the home budget.



Haruaki angrily turned his gaze, subconsciously searching for signs of his father, but already knowing he was not going to be found. This was because Honatsu was waiting at the villa because the superintendent's arrival time was unknown.

Killing time under the excuse of watching over their belongings, Haruaki stared out at his surroundings.

Shiraho was sitting under a parasol on the side, gritting her teeth hard as though she wanted to rush over to Sovereignty any moment. However, she was unable to move because Chihaya was currently applying suntan lotion to her back carefully as though tending to a work of art. As soon as Chihaya was done, Shiraho was probably going to charge ahead and snatch Sovereignty away from Fear.

As though serving as Fear's substitute, Kuroe was wearing a common navy-blue school swimsuit, still building sand castles with unnecessarily superb skills as usual. With a distracted look on her face, Kirika was helping out next to her. Like last time, Kirika was wearing a t-shirt and pareo. Although there were very few beachgoers in this area, she was still unable to lower her guard, in case her bondage suit was seen.

Further ahead of them was the smiling Isuzu—it was uncertain whether it was really her, but anyway, there were three identical girls frolicking by the edge of the sea, splashing water at one another. Instead of swimsuits, they were wearing white robes that looked like the ones used in Shinto ritual purification. This was apparently because there was no way to prepare swimsuits for all fifteen of the kagura bells. Although Haruaki felt that it was a bit too unguarded for them to be dressed like that, underneath... Presumably, they were wearing something else beneath. Assuredly.

There was a little interlude happening earlier. In the beginning, all fifteen kagura bells had lined themselves in a row, all dressed in white robes. "Wow~ I haven't been to the beach for so long~" "...(smile)" "...(smile)" Just as they were about to walk to the sea, Haruaki frantically stopped them: "Wait! This looks too much like collective suicide by drowning, it's terrifying!" Since the sight might cause other beachgoers to call the police, the bells seemed to be taking turns to play currently.

Just then—

"Hah...! Hoo...! Hah...!"

Haruaki heard the sound of panting approaching. Looking back, he saw Kotetsu dressed in a t-shirt and swimming trunks, sprinting across the beach. As a side note, this was not Kotetsu's original attire, but the result after two changes of clothing.

His initial appearance was a plain and old-fashioned "you need to be dressed like this to swim" kind of style, consisting of what could be considered either swimwear or underpants, a *fundoshi* loincloth that truly brought to life the spirit of "now this is a Japanese man!" Standing with his legs apart on the beach with his upper body naked, Kotetsu was rapidly taken away by the girls, especially Konoha whose vigor suggested a blood feud against the *fundoshi*.

The second time was an awkward appearance in a white school swimsuit along with "no helping it, speaking of other swimwear at hand, all I have is this one which Muramasa-sama bestowed upon me in the past..." As soon as Kuroe commented "Oh no, a clash with Second Player colors! Danger!", Kotetsu was abducted by the girls again.

In the end, Kotetsu wore this noncontroversial set of swimwear whose pieces were bought from a beach vendor and a nearby supermarket. Perhaps due to Kotetsu's hairstyle or his general demeanor, no matter what he was wearing, he still looked just like a girl.

"Hoo...! Hah...! Hah...!"

With a serious expression, Kotetsu had been running back and forth on the beach. Now, he stopped near the parasol, glancing at Haruaki while using his arm to wipe sweat from his brow. Although he did not say anything, Haruaki tossed a towel and a bottle of water over to him.

"Muu..."

"Take it. It's very hot, right? Rather, I can't bear it anymore, so let me ask a question."

"What question?"

"...Is it fun running like this?"

While drinking the water from the bottle, Kotetsu straightened his back sternly and instantly answered:

"Fun enough. Running on the beach is helpful for training the legs and the lower back."

"I-I see..."

After arriving here—and obtaining suitable swimwear—Kotetsu had spent the whole time dashing silently back and forth along the beach. Single-minded beyond compare. Training for the sake of becoming strong—

"...I..."

"Huh?"

Instead of looking at Haruaki, Kotetsu faced the horizon while speaking:

"I still have not forgotten everything. Neither have I changed from head to toe. Can I change? Or should I not change? I am still searching for the answer. Hence—As a sword, born as a sword as I am, I still currently believe that there is nothing wrong with the goal of becoming stronger than everyone else. That is why I do this."

"Is... that so?"

Haruaki exhaled then spoke while staring at the horizon just like Kotetsu:

"I... don't intend to criticize the goal you're working towards. But if your direction is wrong, I will also tell you 'You're wrong!' That's all. If your goal is to become strong, I think that's fine too. Just don't cause trouble for others."

"...Hmph. No matter what you say, it has nothing to do with me. I am simply doing what I wish to do."

Kotetsu replied while wiping his face and head forcefully with the towel. Then he tossed the towel back to Haruaki and threw him a sideways glare.

"I am going for another run. I am not causing trouble to anyone, so you have no objections, right?"

"Of course not, but it's not every day that you get to visit the beach. You could go have some fun without spending the whole time running."

"Truth be told, I really want to return the same words to you. Haven't you been sitting there without moving all this time—"

"So true~ Haruaki-kun, you should go and play more. By the way, Kotetsu, could it be that you're still bothered by what I mentioned yesterday?"

"Oh! M-Muramasa-sama, that's..."

Konoha joined their conversation. She was wearing a new bikini, displaying her voluptuous body. Like a mischievous child, she cocked her head and looked at Haruaki.

"My, this Kotetsu, yesterday when he ran over to my room with such a serious look on his face, I was wondering what he was going to say, but it turned out he asked: 'Umm, I heard that seawater is saltwater, won't we rust...?' Back then, his face was super serious—"

"Muramasa-sama!"

"Like I said, there's no problem as long as you wipe yourself dry thoroughly. Absolutely no rusting, I promise. If you're so scared that all you dare to do is sprint on the beach, that's no fun at all. Go swim for a bit, this is an order."

"B-But..."

Smiling, Konoha bent down and spoke as though blowing into Kotetsu's ear:

"Or mayhap... Thou wouldst defy mine order?"

"I shall enter the water immediately."

Trembling, Kotetsu dashed forward almost perpendicularly, screaming "Buddha have mercy!" before plunging headlong into the sea. Konoha giggled while watching this scene.

"Ahaha. Isn't such obedience really nice?"

"Y-Yeah..."

Inexplicably, Haruaki felt his heart pounding madly. Konoha was in a swimsuit. Her hairstyle had changed and this was a new swimsuit. Clearly that was all yet she felt different from the usual Konoha. Did her skin appear to sparkle this much? Were her thighs this dazzling to look at? Did her bosom seem so warm? Also, back when he touched those lips of hers that looked so soft, in fact, they really were very soft at the time—

"Haruaki-kun?"

"Oh! W-What is it?"

Konoha leaned forward as though emphasizing her cleavage to him, giggling "ehehe~" before pointing her index finger lightly at him.

"You tied it on immediately. Thank you."

"Oh... Yeah. Because I happen to have nothing to hang on it anyway."

Konoha was referring to Haruaki's cellphone among the belongings kept under the parasol. Tied to the cellphone was the decorative charm she had just given to him earlier as a present. It was a cellphone accessory akin to a medal or a pin, in the shape of a miniaturized Japanese sword.

"To be honest, I think this kind of present is just right. If I received a very expensive present, I'd feel a huge mental burden instead. Thank you, Konoha."

"Th-That's right! I knew it! I'm so glad, yes!"

Konoha's dainty face instantly brightened up. For some reason, she even clenched her fist and puffed "mufuu" forcefully. She was so touched that she spun towards another direction and murmured quietly:

"Ufufu. What a great success for the strategy of giving a unobtrusive present that could be brought to the seaside... With this, I should be the first person to hand over a present, which ought to leave a memorable impression... And the item I picked was neither too burdensome nor too simple, plus there's the tiny consideration that he would think of me every time he looked at his cellphone... Perfect!"

Haruaki did not understand but at least he could sense that she was overjoyed.

Was it that happy? All he did was accept her birthday present, that was all.

—Yes... I guess. Because she... she—

"Haruaki-kun?"

He was thinking he must say something to her, he had that obligation. However, he did not know what he should say. Thank her for the present? He had already said that.

This was related to her feelings and his own feelings.

They stared into each other's eyes. Although this was something they had done countless times in the past, there was a new significance lately. No, was he the only one who thought that? What kind of feelings did she carry when looking into his eyes throughout the years?

Konoha presumably sensed something and looked like she was waiting seriously for him to continue.

However, he still had not prepared what he should say. Hold on. Hold on longer. I still haven't—

"Yachi, it's time for someone else to watch the—"

"Hoohee—I'm so tired from having fun, my throat is all thirsty. Hey~ Haruaki, got anything to drink..."

Just at that moment, Kirika and Fear both happened to approach the parasol. The two of them noticed the situation here at the same time and halted their speech and movements unnaturally.

For some unknown reason, Haruaki could sense nervous tension slowly hanging in the surrounding air. Clearly on the surface, the girls' expressions and attitudes were the same as usual. Really, for some unknown reason.

"I want... to drink something, so let me go buy some drinks. The vending machine is that way, right? If you guys wanna drink something, let me buy them for you while I'm at it? ...Nothing? Then I'm going. Oh my~ The beach is really fun~ So unbelievably fun~"

Fear swiftly took out her purse from her own belongings and ran towards the beach vendors while holding the swim ring around her waist. Her smiling face seemed a bit unnatural. Was Haruaki imagining things?

Almost simultaneously—

"I wanted to say... It's time for someone else to watch over our things, but come to think of it, I'd like to go to the washroom. So I'll have to count on you for a while longer. Well then, see you later."

"Oh! Kotetsu looks like one of those bald sea goblins with his head out of the water, looking this way! He looks so lonely and very vengeful, so I'd better accompany him for a while. I'm going now!"

Kirika and Konoha also turned around and left as though they had thought of things to do by chance. Kirika walked over to the villa whereas Konoha made her way to the sea.

Finally—It was just like earlier.

Haruaki was left all alone under the parasol.

Part 10

Isuzu helped out with the sand castle building while smiling cordially.

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation: This air is truly heavy with the springtime of youth~"

"That's so true. This very bittersweet presence, tugging at heartstrings... It's unbearable~"

Kuroe agreed from the bottom of her heart and threw a sideways glance at the parasol's direction—Coincidentally, that was just as Kotetsu was dashing from there, taking a mighty leap into the sea as though committing suicide. Remaining at the scene, Konoha and Haruaki were staring into each other's eyes under an unusual atmosphere. Then immediately, Fear and Kirika both approached the parasol from different directions.

"Hmm~ The taste of youth again."

Now it was getting interesting. But at the same time, Kuroe also felt worried.

"Change" was inevitable but she really did not wish for things to turn into chaos in the end. "Imbalance"—Thought Kuroe. Hence, she decided to pay attention at all times, to prevent that kind of situation from arising at least.

Of course, she had no intention of interfering with their—or rather, his—conclusions. If he were to ask, she would offer advice but ultimately, she hoped to remain unbiased and must remain so. This was the rule of the observer.

However—Her current feelings were inclined towards cheering for the girl who was a tad behind.

"This current situation feels like 'although she's realized her own feelings... she still doesn't know how to express them'~ After all, that's related to knowledge and experience."

Walking over with a swim ring around her, Fear saw the two under the parasol, then after seeing Kirika, she suddenly froze. She proceeded to suspiciously search through her belongings, swiftly leaving after obtaining her purse—

Kuroe understood that she had fled.

"Also, she has never experienced intimate interactions with others, so she's completely lost in this area too. Even if she could reach a conclusion on her own, once you add other people, it becomes very unclear—It feels like Ficchi is facing challenges in all sorts of ways."

"Although I don't quite understand, I do believe that trials and tribulations are part of so-called youth!"

"...Perhaps."

Looking back at the smiling shrine maiden, Kuroe smiled as well.

For Fear, overcoming those hurdles was very important. Hence, Kuroe was not going to help out.

Nevertheless, Kuroe believed that she should at least say "do your best." Giving Fear a push should be fine. A little push, just like when she was hesitating whether to give a birthday present, for example, at least a light push from the back.

"Hmm. Anyway, I don't think she brought it here, so it'll have to wait until we get back home~..."

Kuroe simply mumbled in her mouth then turned her attention to the parasol's direction again.

Haruaki was left alone there now. With a spaced out look, he was thinking about something.

Even towards Haruaki, Kuroe's policy remained the same. She could not help out directly. Therefore—

(A dilemma is only natural. But sooner or later, you must find your own answer... Do your best, Haru.)

As though praying, Kuroe could only whisper softly like this in her heart.

Part 11

Kirika walked forward, her heart filled with self-contempt. Naturally, going to the washroom was a lie. It was only because she was unsure whether she could stay there; only because she felt uncomfortable—That was why she left.

Although she had already reached the front of the superintendent's villa, it would be too much of a pain to go in just for the sake of establishing an alibi. She decided to stroll casually in the surroundings to kill time. Then walking with her head slightly lowered, she thought back over what happened just now.

(He's using... a cellphone strap I've never seen before.)

It was most likely the birthday present from Konoha. Very early on, Kirika had noticed Konoha's feelings. It would not be much of a stretch to say that she had known ever since she met Konoha.

She needed Konoha as a formidable rival. In order to complete her earlier confession that was not considered complete yet, she had to have Konoha return first. But in fact, she had rescued Konoha. Not only that, but Konoha had also made an even more progressive declaration in front of them, now that things had reached this point—

(...No.)

While circling around the villa pointlessly, Kirika shook her head lightly.

So what? Konoha was Konoha whereas she was herself. That's the way it is, isn't it, Ueno Kirika? Absolutely ridiculous.

All she had to do was rely on herself and put in an all-out effort. When the time came, she would be able to accept the conclusion no matter what resulted. So long as it was fighting fair and square, fighting, fighting to the last moment, she definitely did not find herself pathetic and be able to move forward even more directly than before. Indeed—In this regard, she was quite similar to Konoha. Both of them believed that only by expressing their feelings to him could they continue to move forward.

"All-out effort huh...?"

Birthday present. On this front, she stood in stark contrast to Konoha who had taken action like fighting a war on horseback, prioritizing speed and surprise tactics. She had not brought the birthday present along to this place. This visit to the beach was meant to return on the same day, hence Kirika intended to return home first before seeing him again that night to hand over the present. Doing so would provide a legitimate reason for her to visit the Yachi home—

"...What a calculating girl I am, absolutely ridiculous."

She murmured in self-deprecation. However, it was different for her unlike Konoha and the others who lived under the same roof as him. Unless she deliberately created opportunities to meet him, it was impossible to oppose the other rivals. Hence, this was just her way of fighting—

Walking while contemplating these matters, Kirika finished one circle around the villa. Since she had claimed to leave for the washroom, she was worried that Haruaki might start imagining disturbing things if she spent too much time. Kirika decided it was time to return to the parasol.

The asphalt texture under her sandals gave way to the sensation of soft sand whose tiny rustling sounded quite pleasant to the ear.

Kirika looked ahead to see that he was still sitting under the parasol, spacing out. Thinking "this time, it's really my turn to watch over the belongings," Kirika approached him from behind—

"...!"

Then she halted in shock.

Because she heard him. At that moment, Haruaki was muttering to himself.

Undoubtedly, it came straight from the heart—Very cruel words.

After Fear, Konoha and Kirika left, even after a very long time...

Remaining under the parasol, Haruaki still continued to think.

He thought back to what happened just now, the three girls who had behaved a little stiffly.

(...I see, it's not just my own problem...)

Konoha had witnessed the scene when Kirika confessed her feelings to him. Kirika and Fear had witnessed the scene when Konoha expressed her feelings. They were aware of one another's feelings. And he knew as well...

(What should... I do?)

To be honest, he found it a little difficult to get along with everyone.

Why was that? He knew very well. Because he was avoiding Konoha and Kirika. Because he had no idea how he ought to interact with them.

That being said, what was a confession? Haruaki pondered. It meant liking someone. It meant conveying this fact. Naturally, he could understand. Haruaki was also an ordinary boy. Such matters would cross his mind on occasion.

However, just as he tried to continue thinking further—Instantly, he was frozen to the spot.

What did Kirika and Konoha seek from him? He did not know. For example, normally speaking, suppose he were to start going out with one of them. Himself going out with Konoha. Himself going out with Kirika. Trying to picture those scenes—He could not. Too difficult. His entire body felt itchy. He tried to go further and imagine doing ordinary couple activities as a pair—He could not picture it either. Instantly, his brain and heart reached a state of saturation.

"Sigh..."

Haruaki shook his head, placed his hands on his lower back and straightened his spine. The peaceful scene before him entered into view. Shiraho and Sovereignty were playing beach volleyball with Chihaya and the kagura bells. Soon about to finish her sand castle, Kuroe was assisted by one of the kagura bells. Since she was speaking, that would be Isuzu, right? Fear was chugging a Ramune soft drink, walking while looking for pretty shells and other things. Konoha and Kotetsu were swimming together—

A heartwarming scene that seemed to symbolize their normal life.

Indeed. After Konoha's return, their days were back to normal. However—Precisely because of that, there were memories he must recall. Some things must not be forgotten.

He had already promised Kirika to give her a reply after Konoha returned home.

Right now, due to the chaos and ambiguous atmosphere surrounding his father's return, it was merely akin to soccer stoppage time that had been extended again and again. He must come up with an answer. However, how should he answer—

Thinking, thinking, thinking.

To keep thinking about a certain issue without any answer in sight, honestly speaking, that was quite hard and painful.

Hence—Haruaki could not help but—

Utter words of resignation.

"Sigh... If only the status quo could be maintained forever..."

"—!"

In that instant.

He heard the sound of sand grinding.

Haruaki looked back in surprise to see—

Staring wide-eyed in shock, Kirika rooted to the spot.

Part 12

Those were such—

Cruel words.

Why had she done something like this?

—Because she wanted to change. Because she believed that the willpower itself of accepting change head on would serve as strength to go forward. However. However—

"C-Class Rep..."

He frantically stood up. But—

"Stay away! Don't speak!"

Kirika yelled briefly then turned around. She could sense him suddenly stopping his initial intention to rush over.

She felt the world spin around similar to dizziness. He was right. Of course. Nevertheless—

"...I know. I can understand how you feel as well. But, therefore, please. Right now, only right now—Don't say... anything. Don't do anything either. For just one minute..."

"Class Rep..."

Her wishes were conveyed. He stood there behind her, frozen. Very likely—still staring at her back.

Kirika quietly exhaled, trying to convince herself to calm down.

During this one minute she had obtained, she pondered what she ought to do next. What action should she take as the next step? There were countless ways of reacting.

Should she really question him in anger? Or reprimand him in tears? Embrace him with trembling shoulders? Take him into her arms and steal his lips? Or apologize and flee... However, every choice was so absolutely ridiculous.

In the end—She chose to remind.

Still with her back facing him, she said:

"I really... don't intend... to wait forever."

Give her the answer. Give her a reply. Even if it was a declaration of defeat. Give her proof that she had fought.

"I'm not the kind of... shameless girl who... can keep hanging around... while you can keep stringing me along ambiguously..."

Through her back, she could sense his entire body shudder from the shock.

Yes. There was no problem with being unable to convey her feelings of love to him. She did not mind getting rejected either. It would be the natural conclusion, perhaps.

However—If that confession were to be treated as though it had never happened, that would be the most tragic result for her. Because that would mean that her confession—her existence—meant only "this little" to him.

If that really were to come true...

Then just as she had told him just now, she was not that shameless of a girl. Asking her to act as though nothing had happened, to continue sharing the same space as him, that would be impossible for her to comply.

(...!)

Kirika bit her lip and finally admitted it.

In other words, the worst case scenario.

Namely, her relationship with him—Shall end here.

Haruaki also realized it. Her mildly trembling back was currently pleading without uncertainty.

Heavy words. Yet they were also perfectly natural.

If you won't face me properly, I cannot stay here any longer—

This was definitely the meaning of her words.

She was this serious. Using serious words to voice her serious thoughts and feelings. This was what she had conveyed to him on that day.

Haruaki had thought he understood mentally, but only now did it truly turn into actual feelings, stabbing into his heart.

Ah—Indeed. Escape was not an option. He must face her and think seriously.

Confronting her seriousness, he must also answer seriously. He was not allowed to escape just because it was hard and painful.

"Class Rep... I get it now. Sorry, I can't guarantee that I will be able to answer you right now, but in the near future, I will definitely—"

Just as Haruaki was in the middle of his sentence...

"Nuoh!? What is that? What's going on?"

Fear's yelling was first to be heard, then Haruaki quickly noticed nearby people clamoring. Not just their group playing in the vicinity, but also the other beachgoers on the adjacent stretch of sand.

"Is it some kind of event?"

"No idea. Anyway, it's spectacular!"

People were talking nonstop while looking in the same direction. Naturally, Konoha and the others had stopped swimming and frolicking and were looking towards that side.

Haruaki and Kirika also turned their heads under the same influence.

Then what the two of them saw was—

Part 13

The second floor of the villa had a balcony with excellent exposure to the wind. Leaning his upper body against the railing, Yachi Honatsu looked out into the distance. Under the sunny weather, he was dressed in swimwear with a parka on top. The breeze felt very comfortable.

The balcony offered an expansive view of the scenery. A very open feeling. The sea and the sky both extended to the far reaches. The two shades of blue remained absolutely distinct but leaned close together along the horizon like a pair of

inseparable twins. Once sundown came around, those twins were going to dress up glamorously in wonderful colors, holding a fashion show with just the two of them.

"Hmm~ What a great villa. I'm so jealous... By the way, this villa must be very expensive, right? I've been wondering since a long time ago, did you engage in some sort of villainy to make so much money, Gab-chan?"

"Hahaha! Whether past or present, I have never made any money in a manner that would bring about divine retribution."

Closing one eye as though winking, Honatsu smiled wryly while turning his head to look behind him.

Walking towards him was the man in a gas mask, dressed in a suit as usual despite the sunny weather. Following behind him was his secretary, Houjyou Zenon, transporting his suitcase by rolling it. As a side note, there was one more person in view, currently lazing about, having an afternoon nap indoors, her older sister Houjyou Ganon. In order to welcome Haruaki's group into this villa, she had been waiting for them since early morning.

"My apologies, the flight was delayed."

"There's no helping that. Though I've no idea where you went."

The awaited one who had arrived later than expected—Sekaibashi Gabriel—continued to walk forward and stood beside Honatsu. Like Honatsu, he leaned against the railing and looked outside.

Amidst the girls who looked like they were enjoying themselves, there was only one person looking bored with nothing to do—the son. More accurately, he looked distracted. This too was part of youth. Honatsu smiled wryly.

"I heard today is Haruaki-kun's birthday? Is this why you returned to Japan after such a long absence?"

"Hmm~ I suppose, something like that. After all, it's my only child's birthday~"

Honatsu giggled and said:

"I've also prepared a wonderful present. But even after I told him that, Haruaki made a very wary look, what a lapse from good manners~ However, however, I also told him the proper rules as his parent, that I won't give him the present unless he behaves as an obedient child—"

"Although superficially, it looks like I'm talking very normally to you, I'm sorry, my curiosity and other questions in my mind are killing me. Honatsu-san... What happened to you?"

"Many things. So, where should I start~?"

The dear and longtime friend seemed to sigh before shaking his head in exasperation.

"Given how far we go back, there's no need to force yourself to mimic a woman's tone of voice to match your appearance."

Honatsu relaxed his tense face, then immediately—

"...Sekaibashi-kun, I'm not forcing myself, you know? I just feel that *it'd be less troublesome if current developments continued.*"

Although it was still a woman's voice, these words definitely sounded like the long-absent Yachi Honatsu to Sekaibashi's ears. After a moment of silence, he shrugged with slight relief and said:

"Fine, since you have made your decision, this is fine too. I don't really mind either way."

"Me too—Or should I be using feminine pronouns instead? I feel that either way works if I'm facing you. Well, in any case, I'll just adjust according to circumstances."

"Let it be so."

The two of them turned back to looking out from the balcony, shoulder to shoulder.

As though mixing into the silence, as though waiting for the moment when the wind would blow away those words, Sekaibashi asked briefly. Honatsu also gave a brief answer.

"Is it a curse?"

"Nope."

"Voluntary?"

"Indeed."

"Painful?"

"Already used to it."

"Well then—"

Honatsu smiled wryly and waved at the man in the gas mask beside him.

"I've already promised Haruaki and the others to explain everything together. Also, since it's not a particularly amazing reason, let's wait until everyone has gathered before I explain."

"The way I see it, the benefactor whom I've not seen for a very long time has had a sex change. I really can't imagine there could be no particularly amazing reason..."

"Once you hear it, you'll only think 'what, it's just something like that?' On my end, I'm now starting to worry if it really was necessary to call you, Haruaki and everyone else out here specifically to give a solemn explanation. If I end up getting punched, you have to save me. Especially since he seems to be hating me recently."

"If you've refused to explain so far, it's not like I can't understand. So, allow me to ask one more question just as the advance payment for serving as the bodyguard... Was this matter related to Haruaki-kun?"

"Oh? Why do you ask?"

"Purely intuition."

"Haha! Then I'll answer you—Yes, I suppose it counts for half the reason."

"What about the other half?"

Honatsu moved his body away lightly from the railing and shifted his gaze that was originally directed at the beach. The most striking girl. Looking at the girl with beautiful, glittering, silver hair, he said:

"Naturally... *It's for the girl whom I found.* I have to take responsibility for her future."

Hearing Honatsu say such a pretentious word, "responsibility," Sekaibashi was probably trying to hold in his laughter.

Seeing him not say a single word for quite a while, Honatsu could not help but conclude that. His silence was getting long enough to make one feel it was too long.

Puzzled, Honatsu turned to look at Sekaibashi beside him. For some reason, he was staring motionlessly at the surface of the sea, stunned with surprise.

"Im—possible!"

Then suddenly, he moved all at once, leaning violently towards the railing, gripping the railing hard enough to be audible. Honatsu followed his gaze to the horizon in the distance where the sky met the sea.

In a certain sense, what had appeared there was something perfectly commonplace.

Something that was perfectly natural to exist on the sea, without anything unusual about it.

Ships.

However, it was not just any ship. The ship was massive enough that even from land, one could tell how gigantic it was.

Furthermore, there was more than one ship. Although shaped differently and varying in size to some extent, these similar ships were all gigantic—Roughly ten of them. These ships were arranged side by side neatly in a row, silently approaching this shore.

As though trying to calm himself, Sekaibashi was breathing hard under the gas mask.

Then he looked back into the villa, towards Zenon who was staring at the same scene in astonishment. In a voice that could not disguise his trembling, he said to her:

"Zenon-kun, could you please go outside and gather Fear-kun and everyone else immediately—Of course, we are going together. A very important guest seems to have arrived."

Chapter 2 - Dragon Head Looming on the Horizon / "His birthday (II)"

Part 1

The fleet on the sea stopped. However, a small boat appeared from among them and made a beeline towards Haruaki's group.

They watched as the boat advanced for quite a few minutes. Slowly, the boat buried its prow into beach before them. Strangers jumped out from the boat. First was a man with a young girl... Or rather, a man with a young girl "attached"?

"There!"

A tall redheaded man. His well-built and brawny body did not even show an ounce of fat. Despite his massive size, the man's entire body was covered with extremely flexible muscles, displaying a physique that one would associate with an Olympic athlete's. Reminiscent of a lion, beneath his slightly long and unkempt hair was a manly face with deep-set features. Overall, he was a man who gave off a fierce and rugged impression.

Also, most striking of all was the petite girl, currently clinging to his muscular shoulder and arm using her limbs. Haruaki recalled that this style of doll used to be fashionable at one point, but of course, this girl was no doll. She moved. Clinging to the arm, she slowly climbed up, moving some distance—to the man's back. After reaching a piggyback posture, she climbed over the man's head and glared at everyone with vicious eyes. One could almost hear growling sounds. The girl was truly tiny in stature, dressed in an outfit that was almost all black, clinging tightly to the man while glaring at everyone—A girl whom one could not help but associate with the image of an imp.

The man advanced over the beach while slightly looking around without appearing to be searching for anything in particular. Then immediately, his gaze settled on a certain point.

"Oh... Ohhhhh~! Yes yes, you're really here! You're Gabriel, right? I can't believe you're wearing such a cool-looking mask! Haha~ It's been so long!"

The man smiled and waved his hand while speaking cheerfully. Unexpectedly, just by smiling, that fierce face instantly felt like it had gained a boyish sense of friendliness.

Greatly surprised, Haruaki looked at the one whom this man had called out to. Namely, the one who had arrived at this beach not too long ago without saying anything, simply staring at the sea as though waiting for something—his own school's superintendent.

Then for some reason, the instant the mysterious man called out, Zenon and Ganon's shoulders shook while they were standing by the superintendent's side. However, the superintendent raised his hand lightly and stopped his two

subordinates from taking some kind of action, then made something like a shrug and said:

"—You haven't changed at all, Max."

"Really? I can't feel it myself."

At this time, the boat's engine noise ended and another young woman descended onto the beach. She was dressed in loose clothing reminiscent of Chinese or Central Asian style with her hands inserted into the large sleeves of opposite sides. Despite the looseness of her garments, her extremely svelte figure was obvious from a single glance. As for a certain part of her body, its enormity could possibly surpass Konoha's. Perhaps out of habit, she kept her eyes almost closed, so it was difficult to read her emotions.

After seeing her, the shoulders of the superintendent and his aides shook again. But at this moment—

"Hey~ Superintendent, it's just you guys talkin, we're totally lost here. Do you know these people?"

Fear was suspiciously eyeing the people who had arrived by boat and asked a question that could not be more natural.

"Yes, they are old friends."

The superintendent's answer was very simple. Zenon and Ganon did not interject. Haruaki took this opportunity to sweep his gaze around slightly. Like himself and Fear, Konoha, Kirika and Kuroe were watching the new arrivals warily. Shiraho and Chihaya was maintaining their group's outsider attitude as though going "none of our business." Then there was—

Kotetsu's entire body was screaming bloody murder while he glared viciously at the group before him. It was as though he could take action any time, as though he could attack in full force any time.

Haruaki did not know if the man had noticed Kotetsu's killing intent, but the guy grinned and said:

"Serve me a cup of tea first! Wow, is that your villa over there? You must have made bucket loads of money~"

Without waiting for the superintendent to answer, the man strode towards the villa with the girl still clinging to his back. The woman with almost closed eyes also followed them quietly.

"Well, that's—fine."

The superintendent oriented his gas mask towards the sea for an instant. While walking past him, the man said:

"Relax, they're not going to move. I've given orders already."

"Then... Why did you bring *that* here?"

The man replied very readily.

"I just happened to bring it along. It just so happened. You could call it coincidence as well. If Nirushaaki were waiting for me, I would have hurried here alone, but since this objective had vanished, I used this rare chance to leisurely move the entire Dragon Island over."

"...That's why you took longer than what I was told? I was thinking you were definitely not coming."

Haruaki's group did not register any of the superintendent's words at all.

As soon as the man uttered that name—Haruaki and his companions instantly showed alarm on their faces, lowering their stances in preparation for combat. They were just like Kotetsu who had become filled with killing intent as soon as he saw them. Haruaki finally understood the meaning of Kotetsu's reaction.

"No way—!"

Konoha readied a knifehand strike, intently staring at the trio without lowering her guard.

However, as though to restrain everyone's killing intent, the superintendent raised a hand lightly, roughly conveying the message: If the other side intended to fight, they would have made a move a long time ago, so please calm down for now.

Then still staring at the fleet across the sea, the superintendent spoke as though addressing Haruaki's group:

"Indeed—That there is precisely the Draconian's headquarters, the giant mobile fleet known as Dragon Island. Also—"

The superintendent turned to face forward, no longer looking at the sea. The woman with narrowed eyes happened to pass by him while following the man.

"Granaury, since you are by his side, that implies—"

"What a happy/sad reunion... It has been a long time. The situation is as you imagine."

The woman stopped walking for merely an instant, but still looked ahead with the side of her face towards the superintendent while replying in this strange verbal pattern. Then she bowed lightly and followed the man again.

The superintendent sighed then shifted his gaze again—towards the back of the man walking up to the villa.

"Although I've heard rumors... You really are the current Number One, Max."

Part 2

The largest space on the ground floor of the villa was a living room with tall ceilings. At the center, on one of the sofas surrounding a table—there was no choice but to admit this—sat the following trio: the man who was allegedly the boss of the Draconians, the beauty with narrowed eyes who comported herself like a maidservant, as well as the girl clinging to the man's shoulder.

"Some of you probably don't know me, so I'll introduce myself. I am Maximilian Pendragon."

The man swept his gaze around and spoke with a fearless smile. The superintendent tilted his head slightly.

"You've added a surname you didn't have before, though I'm not surprised... Pendragon huh?"

"I was thinking I should add a surname, so I looked everywhere and chanced upon this name. It means something like dragon head, which I feel is appropriate, so I picked it. Not bad, right?"

"Of course! It's super cool!"

"Identical to certain historical figures, truly an arrogant/perfect name, Master."

"How contradictory your words as always... Anyway, it's definitely better than just Maximilian on its own."

The superintendent was sitting opposite the man while conversing with them. Zenon and Ganon were standing behind the superintendent's sofa as though protecting his back, bearing unprecedentedly serious expressions on their faces.

Meanwhile, Haruaki and others were leaning against the living room wall. Kuroe was sitting on a cushion she had pulled over on her own without asking. Haruaki really admired her laid back ways. Shiraho and Sovereignty were staying at the second floor hallway overlooking the living room. Chihaya and Isuzu were sitting in the middle of the staircase leading to the second floor. Compared to Shiraho's disinterest, Chihaya showed a faint glint of seriousness in her eyes. Finally, there was Honatsu who had his elbows leaning on the kitchen counter, watching the whole affair's developments with interest.

Pendragon suddenly looked at Haruaki's group that was glaring at them offensively, then smiled cheerfully again, as bright as sunshine, and said:

"Haha~ What nice spirit you have there. However... I'll make this clear first. I don't really want to fight you guys, Fear-in-Cube. Unless you insist, of course, which would be a different matter."

"Hmph! Don't want to fight? I seem to be hearing this a lot lately, but in fact, there wasn't a single time when things ended peacefully!"

"Trust me. Ultimately, what defeated Nirushaaki was the suicide attack executed by a certain someone from the Knights Dominion, right? Strictly speaking, you guys did not defeat her. As a result, it's not appropriate for Number One to step in to punish people who failed to defeat Number Two. I have to attend to matters of face too."

Next, Pendragon looked at Kotetsu whose shaking hand was in a tiger claw dangling by his side.

"You don't need to be so nervous... I'm not interested in you either, Kotetsu. Since Nirushaaki is no longer around, if you want to stay by another master's side to seek your own strength, do as you wish. If you couldn't care less about being strong or not in the first place, do as you wish too. I'm actually quite lenient on this issue."

"...I... am not..."

Kotetsu's words dried up mid-sentence. He bowed his head, looking like he did not know what to say.

That being said—Haruaki recalled what Pendragon had just said.



—Lenient? The leader of the organization that believed "curses existed for the sake of becoming stronger than everyone else" actually said "lenient"? Although Haruaki did not think Pendragon was lying, he still found it impossible to believe. What was his intention?

At this moment, the situation suddenly changed dramatically.

Someone who had been suppressing her emotions the whole time finally surpassed her limit.

This someone had no combat ability at all and did not even have a reason to be here, which was why no one paid attention to her movements.

The someone whom no one expected her to commit this unbelievable act of violence—

Namely, *Hayakawa Chihaya*.

Standing up from the staircase she had been sitting, with her lips pursed in a straight line, she strode across the living room. Advancing in a straight line without regard for anything else, to the point that one would mistakenly think she was heading to the kitchen for some juice.

However, instead of going to the kitchen, she stopped in front of the sofa.

Then drawing in a quick breath, she raised her arm at the same time—

Smack!

The instant the sound of a slap striking someone's cheek was heard—

"*Stop!*"

Pendragon's voice was heard with pressure enough to bring a shudder down Haruaki's spine.

These two sounds entered Haruaki's ears almost in superposition. During the same instant, a change occurred in the view ahead.

"Stop... Don't do anything, Riko and Granaury."

"B-But~ This girl hit you!"

"What a very crisp and clear sound, my uterus is hurting with excitement. Truly perfect/careless."

The girl originally clinging to Pendragon's back had instantly shifted her position. Right now, she was supporting herself with just her thighs clamped around his neck, extending her body through the air, her extended hand stopping just as she was about to grab Chihaya's throat.

The woman with narrowed eyes had pulled her hand out from her loose sleeve with lightning speed, thrusting it forward under her armpit. With her palm facing upwards, her sharp fingertips had also stopped just before they touched Chihaya's chest.

"I told them to stop because you are clearly an amateur. So... Why?"

Still sitting on the sofa, Pendragon looked up at Chihaya. His slightly reddened cheek stood as proof of Chihaya's crime.

The current atmosphere was tense. It was imperative not to make a reckless move. Haruaki had no choice but to watch silently with Fear and the others.

Just as Pendragon said, Chihaya was just an amateur. Despite the killing intent of warriors slowly brushing against her skin, despite her eyes glimmering with tears beneath her glasses, despite her trembling legs—

She still did not collapse on the spot.

As though putting on a brave face, she maintained her twisted expression of anger and said:

"I am... Hiwatari Yume's friend...!"

"...Oh?"

Pendragon narrowed his eyes.

"I heard that she was following your orders to come to my school. Then she died. So it can be said that she died because of you!"

"That's not right~ The actual killer was one of those guys from the Knights Dominion! By the way, don't go acting so familiar—Nyahhh!?"

"Shut up, Riko, or else things will get even more complicated. Granaury, you sit down too."

Pendragon grabbed the girl leaning forward from him—grabbing Riko's waist—and threw her sideways. With her thighs wrapped around his neck as a fulcrum, Riko spun half a circle then returned to his back using high-difficulty movements akin to pro wrestling or dance techniques. The woman named Granaury also silently returned to her seat on the sofa.

"—Yes, I sent her there. She died because of me... Perhaps you could say that."

"Not perhaps, it totally is the case!"

"But that was also the result of her choice. Even if it meant sacrificing herself, she still chose to save Fear-in-Cube."

From the corner of his eye, Haruaki seemed to catch a gasp. The silver-haired head was shaking slightly. Haruaki did not know what kind of face she was making, but she was probably reminiscing. Reminiscing that brave girl who was both her friend and her first underclassman.

Chihaya shook her head emotionally and rebutted Pendragon.

"How inane! Forcing her into that kind of desperate situation was really too meaningless! What 'becoming strong' nonsense, what a great big idiot!"

Probably unable to ignore these words, Riko was frowning with displeasure. Even so, Pendragon's voice remained very calm, to the point that one could describe it as even steadier than before.

"Yes, her death definitely resulted because I sent her there. I honestly concede this point. However... Her will to become strong is the one thing I ask that you do not disregard, please."

Pendragon lifted his head slightly. Not only his voice but even his gaze was very calm and deep. Under his stare, Chihaya retreated as though intimidated by his silent pressure.

"W-What do you mean by that...?"

"She was an orphan and not even Japanese in the first place. I happened to find her back when she was standing in shock amidst conflict, slaughter and chaos, then I happened to take her in and raised her. Why? It goes without saying— Naturally, because she was staring at me from under the corpses of her parents, her eyes told me she wanted to become strong."

"! ...That's to say... You count as her foster parent..."

Chihaya's voice stuttered and grew smaller and smaller, vanishing mid-sentence. Hearing her mumbling words, Pendragon first answered "that's actually quite a common situation for Draconians" before continuing:

"It's not a crime for the weak to seek strength, right? That's even more true for those who have thoroughly come to understand how weak they are. Sometimes, this even becomes a person's goal for living. To say "becoming strong is truly inane" to people like that, don't you find that very cruel?"

"Oh..."

"I'm not going to ask for your approval, neither will I seek your understanding. However, at least don't reject the idea. Because that girl can't even reject your rejections anymore."

Chihaya looked down, grabbing her elbows as though hugging herself.

Then after spending a long time, she finally squeezed out a feeble voice to say:

"Then... I'm so sorry... But..."

"Excellent!"

Pendragon answered loudly without warning and nodded. Chihaya looked up in surprise.

"So, this topic ends here. And no matter how much more reasoning I bring up, from your perspective, the fact of your friend's death is not going to change. Hence, I can only say this—Sorry. Also... For being willing to be her friend, thank you."

More shockingly, after Pendragon said that—

He bowed his head.

Unbelievably, the leader of an organization was bowing his head to an ordinary high school girl who was just throwing a temper tantrum.

Haruaki's group stared wide-eyed in astonishment. Even as his companions, Riko and Granaury were also rendered speechless. Although Granaury's eyes remained almost closed, making it difficult to read her expression, she was exuding an aura of surprise.

Probably surprised by the excessively straightforward words, Chihaya could only blink repeatedly.

Pendragon slowly lifted his head and looked straight at Chihaya, then he smiled and said:

"By the way, that girl was really fortunate. It's not that easy to make a friend who'll get angry on your behalf. By the way... You're an awesome chick. It must've been tough for you, dealing with that overly excitable girl all the time. Just from that, I can tell you're a kind person."

"W-What?"

"Whether the guts in hitting me or your fit looking body, both are great. That husky voice is quite sexy too. How about it? If you don't mind, let's be friends?"

"W-What are you talking about—I-I-I... I'm gonna hurt you! This time, I'll definitely hit with full force—"

Going red in the face, Chihaya wanted to raise her arm again. However—

"Stop stop stop~ Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, it would be too impolite to hit someone else's guest twice in a row~ So it's time to exit the stage. Excuse me~"

"Ah! Hold on... Isuzu!"

Creeping up quietly from behind, three smiling shrine maidens picked up Chihaya forcibly, transporting her upstairs like carrying a palanquin. Shiraho was probably going to handle the rest.

"Y-You bastard—! That bad habit appeared again!"

"Haha~ What does it matter? As the saying goes, all heroes are perverts."

"I can't believe you can shamelessly say that about yourself, how amazing/terrible."

Even if Chihaya were not taken away by force, Haruaki believed that her slap was not going to hit Pendragon again. That was because Riko had turned herself into a shield—That would be the nicer way to describe it, but actually, Riko had moved in front of Pendragon's face halfway through his proposal to grab him by the collar and shake him forwards and backwards.

Haruaki and his group exchanged glances with exhausted expressions before deciding to relax their tense shoulders.

Although they could not afford to be careless, at least they now understood this man a little. Through his interactions with Chihaya, they came to know certain things.

The Draconians' boss. The Commander. The superintendent's friend. Maximilian Pendragon.

At the very least, he was facing the concept of strength with seriousness. One could not feel twistedness or eccentricity from his attitude. The impression he gave could be considered rather honest and upfront.

But of course—the chances of that upfront honesty causing some kind of trouble could not be ruled out as zero yet.

Part 3

"Purpose? Do you even need to ask? Of course I'm just here to see an old friend. Why else would I be here?"

This was Pendragon's answer to the question "by the way, what are you doing here?" The hosts could not think of anything to refute him, so in the end, they started to prepare tea and refreshments according to numbers present. Haruaki and the others sat down casually on the floor and received the cups.

"Oh, you're the younger of the Houjyou sisters, right? I haven't seen you for a long time too. Looks like you're still following that guy, but once you tire of him, feel free to come over to my side, I'll definitely satisfy—"

"Pray forgive my refusal."

"Ah, so loyal as always... Oh, the older sister is here too. How have you been lately?"

"...So lazy."

Ganon was lying on her side with her jaw's edge resting on one hand. The surprising thing was that she was not as lazy as claimed, from what Haruaki could see. In other words, it seemed like she was speaking without meaning it.

Pendragon grinned without making a sound. Then receiving the iced barley tea Zenono handed over, he took a sip before looking at the gas mask across him, the superintendent who was drinking through a straw.

"By the way, there's something I always wanted to say to you."

"What is it?"

"Basically—I can't believe you ran away while you're ahead! In the last ranking battle, you were second while I was third... I really resented you for that back then."

"Well—I'm truly sorry about that."

Haruaki was reminded. Christmas last year... The incident caused by Kokoro Pentangeli. In the process of resolving the incident, they had come to learn of the superintendent's past.

A former member of the Draconians. The cursed spear «Treason Piercer» whom he loved was destroyed, then he deserted. Ever since, the superintendent had worn a gas mask to hide the tattoo proving his former allegiance to the Draconians, meanwhile searching for a way to resurrect his beloved spear—

Probably in an attempt to diffuse the boring atmosphere, Fear deliberately ate rice crackers with loud crunching noises to go with her tea while saying:

"So you used to be rivals? Did you ever fight each other?"

"Yes. To be honest, I usually placed lower than him. Although he looks like an utterly broken man now, he used to be very amazing."

"Oh? Even though he's just a masked deviant now?"

"Even though he's just a masked deviant now."

"You guys are really..."

The superintendent shook his head lightly in exasperation then—

"But even though you usually placed lower than me, that was only because you hadn't found a weapon suitably matched to your own strength, right? You were using a different weapon every time I saw you, so losing was inevitable."

"Back then, yes, that's definitely correct."

"But... Things seem different now."

The superintendent crossed his hands together over the table and rested his chin on them while looking at the opposite sofa.

"Mmmfufu..."

The girl moved slowly over Pendragon, straddled his neck then nimbly straightened her back and said:

"That's right! He finally found me! I'm his absolute guardian—"

"Oh, I still haven't made introductions. This is Riko who only became mine after you left."

"Hold on! Let me introduce myself with awesomeness at least! Say, declaring so clearly that I am 'yours,' umm, that's too direct, it's embarrassing!"

Riko rubbed her fingertips together in an old-fashioned way, twisting awkwardly. Haruaki already had a rough idea by now.

"So it's just as I thought? This girl is not human..."

Hearing Haruaki, Pendragon immediately grinned and nodded.

"You're correct. As for what she is... Hmm, since we've no intention of fighting, let's keep that unmentioned for now. You guys might feel like fighting if you were to find out, perhaps?"

"Idiot, we're not like you guys. We don't care at all. So—is it the same for the one over there who looks like she could either be awake or asleep?"

"Correct/incorrect. I am like/unlike you."

"Come again?"

Still expressionless, Granaury was still entirely sunk into the sofa, speaking incomprehensible words (but definitely awake). Fear cocked her head in puzzlement upon hearing her reply.

"Oh, every sentence of hers is a pain, so don't worry about it. Just go with the feeling. The feeling is good enough. Going straight to the point, yes, she is also my partner."

"Hmph... I get it now. So you used to keep losing to the superintendent because of the gap in weaponry, but after obtaining these two, you powered up greatly to become Number One, congratulations... Is that what happened?"

"Not necessarily. More precisely, I believe that before becoming Number One, all he obtained was her—the one called Riko-kun? That's all."

The superintendent sighed beneath his gas mask before continuing:

"Because she—Granaury—*used to attend to the original Number One.*"

Once these words were heard, the tension in the air became slightly stronger. However, this did not come from Haruaki's friends but from those who knew about the past. While taking care not to provoke them, Konoha commented quietly:

"Since it's a ranking system, the top will eventually get replaced... That's only natural upon further thought. In other words, the superintendent knew her from before."

"Yes, but rather than me, the one who was truly close with her was—"

"—Liz and I were coincidentally/inevitably compatible. That was all."

Granaury's eyes remained almost closed, making it impossible to tell if she was gazing forward, murmuring softly. Liz. The «Treason Piercer». The one whom the superintendent was in love with.

"Hmm. So summing up, you defeated the previous boss and acquired all his rights?"

"Yeah... Defeated huh? To be more precise, I didn't have the luxury of going easy on him—So it's better to say I killed him."

"Is that so? I guess that's true..."

The superintendent sat back, looking up slightly towards the ceiling and muttered as though to himself:

"The former Number One, the Commander—He was just an elderly man who called himself Long, meaning dragon in Chinese. He was also the founder of the Draconians. As indicated by his name, he was most likely Chinese. Specializing in physical skills under the category of martial arts, his strength was something no one could imitate, also—"

"You can also tell from his own name, right? He was quite sloppy in picking names, which is something I must bring up. Whenever he took in babies, he would only prepare a first name. This was why everyone searched for a cooler name after they grew up."

"So you mean..."

Haruaki stopped mid-sentence, swallowing his words. Naming the babies he took in. Pendragon. His past—was just like Yume's? In other words, Pendragon had killed his own foster father—

"Speaking of which, I seem to recall him teaching you something, Onee-sama? 'The Sword of Void and Night requires exceptional talent.' How rare of him to make that kind of comment. Were you able to master it?"

"No, because I was too lazy..."

In fact, the instant she heard Pendragon say "I killed him," Ganon's eyes seemed slightly perturbed. Using this sloppy answer as a trigger, she returned to a full-body sense of laziness. No rather than laziness, perhaps it was closer to the emptiness of self-abandonment.

Ganon switched hands and leaned on her elbow, flipping herself to the other side and whispered:

"...Really? He died? I guess..."

These women's pasts, these men's pasts. Haruaki and his friends were not privy to them, but these pasts carried definite weight. Connections of the past. Bonds of the past.

The superintendent exhaled deeply.

"I always believed this day would arrive sooner or later. But to be honest... I still find it unbelievable. I'm not doubting your ability, Max, it's just that the Long whom I knew was so overwhelmingly powerful."

"There were two reasons. The first being—"

"Me! It's all thanks to this Riko-sama helping out this weakling!"

"Yes, well said. Good, good."

"H-Ho wow... So honest. I-If only you could be like this every time, seriously."

Riko suddenly poked her head out from his shoulder. Pendragon reached out and wrapped his arm around her head while stroking her hair and rubbing his face lightly against her cheek. Riko's face went bright red while she fidgeted bashfully.

"Second reason... It's just as you say, this day would come eventually. And that time was when it happened. Naturally, I can't defeat the Long whom you knew. However, he cannot remain forever as the one you knew—So that's what happened."

The superintendent nodded lightly in comprehension.

"In other words... Old age?"

"Frankly speaking, that's what I think at least. Even someone who used to wield such overwhelming power would grow old. No one can escape old age..."

Just as Pendragon finished speaking in a calm and quiet voice, Riko straightened herself and stepped on his shoulder, presumably unhappy that his hand had stopped moving.

"However—! As long as we're here, Maximilian will be so invincible that there's no need to care about something like that! Although it's unnecessary, even Granaury has also joined our side! Going as far as to absorb the power of the previous strongest fellow, being strongest, we are truly the strongest!"

Fear placed her glass on the floor, resulting in the sound of ice cubes colliding. Then looking sharply at Pendragon's group, she said:

"Ha! Strength, strength, strength... After saying so much, in the end, it looks like you guys are also obsessed with the concept of strength. I knew it, you guys can't be trusted. You're not plotting anything weird, are you?"

"Nope. Didn't I say just now? Right now, I've no intention of fighting you guys."

Pendragon looked up. From the second-floor hallway overlooking the living room, Chihaya was observing the situation below. She frantically pulled back out of sight. Grinning, Pendragon turned his face forward.

"Wasn't sending Yume to your school evidence enough? You guys already know the purpose, right?"

"I remember it was something called the 'Nest Parasitoid Plan'? Although there are still parts I don't understand... It's some kind of plan to steal my strength, right?"

"Indeed. Although the plan went to waste due to getting hijacked by Nirushaaki, the plan itself did not include anything about fighting your side. It was simply about planting someone by your side who idolized you and possibly might grow strong because she idolized you."

"..."

"After becoming Number One, there are things I only started understanding as a result of my position. Even with a desire to become strong, simply challenging others is useless. Certain types of strength cannot be obtained if all you do is that... Ideas of this sort."

Pendragon leaned his elbow on the sofa's backrest while looking at Fear with a calm expression. Fear pursed her lips hard and took on his gaze squarely as though trying to see through his true thoughts.

Haruaki could hear Kuroe and Kirika whispering softly.

"Hmm~ As expected of the boss, his calm and collectedness is not quite the same as the small potatoes... I guess I can say that?"

"Indeed, calm composure is probably a leader's necessary trait, but the issue here is what lies beneath his calm exterior. I hope it's not terrible and despicable desire like that of a certain organization's lab chief."

Haruaki's feelings were similar. Pendragon's way of thinking was not quite the same as the Draconians they had encountered so far. This should be quite certain. The issue was whether he could be trusted.

Haruaki really wanted to believe. Neither did he want any more trouble. Pendragon was not interested in them and did not intend to fight. Coming here was just to have a reunion with the superintendent. Haruaki hoped that this would be the case from start to finish.

If only this could conclude without any problems arising—

But of course, Haruaki's thought was ultimately an unobtainable wish.

Because even though it was unclear whether Pendragon's side was involved or not, in any case, something had to be done about—

The "ordinary" major incident, which happened in the next second.

"...Muu? It seems quite noisy outside."

"Did something happen?"

Fear's silver hair shook as she spoke. Zenon went across the living room and opened the large glass door facing the beach.

As befitting a villa's style, the glass door allowed them to walk directly to the beach from here. In other words, it connected them to the same space as all the other beachgoers.

Hence, riding upon the wind, the beachgoers' noisy commotion—

Horrifying words which were truly hard to ignore—were transmitted here.

—A phantom slasher had appeared.

Part 4

"The timing is too perfect... You guys must be responsible!"

"No no no, I really have no idea."

While listening to the exchange between Fear and Pendragon, the group dashed to the beach first. Ganon, Shiraho, Sovereignty, Chihaya and the others stayed behind to watch the villa whereas the superintendent and Honatsu, who had remained silent all this time, followed.

Soon they found the source of the commotion. A crowd was gathered on an unpaved path made by tire tracks leading to a plaza near the beach for camping purposes. After pushing through the crowd of bystanders, they went up closer—

"Oh—My apologies but I'll be staying away for now. Kotetsu, you come with me too."

"...Yes."

Konoha and Kotetsu gave up making their way to the center of the crowd, distancing themselves and looking away. In other words—At the center of the crowd, a man could be seen in beach pants along with reddish brown stains splattered on the soil.

Seeing a lifeguard standing by the victim, unsure what to do, Zenon and Kuroe went up with a first aid kit and declared they were willing to bandage the wounded man. Putting aside Kuroe who was dressed in a school swimsuit, Zenon was calm and composed, greatly inspiring others with a sense of security. The lifeguard kept nodding and agreed to let them help. Hence, holding the medical kit they had brought from the villa, they took out things like bandages to start treating the wounded victim. Of course, Kuroe secretly placed her own hair under the bandages.

"The wound is on the arm huh... Although the bleeding is serious, his life doesn't seem to be in danger. But this is truly an absolutely ridiculous situation."

"I'm relieved. What on earth happened..."

It was impossible to question the victim himself in the current circumstances, hence, Haruaki and the others first walked out of the crowd surrounding the man then told Konoha and Kotetsu, who were waiting on the side, that the man's life was not in danger.

Arms crossed, Fear glared viciously at the suspects and said:

"I'll say this again. The timing's too perfect. This wouldn't be your goal, would it?"

"I'll say this again too, I really have no idea. It'd be troublesome if you guys got the wrong idea, so I already gave orders that no one as to leave Dragon Island while I was here... But just in case, let me check. Riko, cellphone."

"Get it yourself~"

Despite saying that, she still reached out while clinging to his arm, rummaging through his pants pocket to take out his cellphone. Glancing at the fleet on the sea, Pendragon operated the phone and pressed it against his ear.

"Therese? You should have a good idea of our members' movements to a certain extent, right? Let me ask a question, did anyone act without permission after I came here?"

'...'

The other side answered something. "Yeah, I thought so." Pendragon spoke quietly and quickly hung up.

"My rule is that members are personally free to defy the Commander's orders. But of course, there's one condition—They must prepare themselves. For example, just like how Nirushaaki prepared for a duel against me."

He grinned proudly and said:

"So in my view, I'm actually hoping for someone to disobey, but unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the case. None of my subordinates acted on their own."

Hearing that, the superintendent suddenly relaxed his tense shoulders and said:

"So, can you guarantee that this phantom slasher is absolutely unrelated to your side?"

"To be honest, there were a few members who had entered this country a while ago. Right now, there's one team who could have come to this area, but they have no reason to hurt people randomly. After all, the curse requires her to lock people up in order to replenish life force."

"No way, are you talking about Satsuko and Fourteen?"

"You know them? Their progress has kind of stalled lately, but they do have

promising talent... Anyway, it's possible they might have come running nearby to greet me, so let me try calling. Let me see~ Ontenzaki, Ontenzaki... Huh? How can it not be here? Oh right, the name I put down was Squishy-ko instead. Despite being so tiny in size, I never thought her waist would be so—

"Ah! I can't believe you're recalling memories that you shouldn't!"

While Riko kept hammering his head, Pendragon took out the cellphone he was just about to put away, then tapped the buttons. He pressed the phone to his ear but the other side did not pick up instantly. After roughly ten seconds, finally—

"Hi, it's me. Where are you two?"

Pendragon's lips went "oh~" once he heard the other side's answer.

Then immediately, he took the cellphone away from his lips slightly and grinned suggestively at Haruaki's group.

"Bingo! They're apparently tailing the phantom slasher as we speak... What do we do?"

Leaving behind Kuroe and Zenon, who were treating the victim, as well as the superintendent and Honatsu, Haruaki and company began to run as fast as they could. The superintendent had stayed behind because once the ambulance called by the lifeguard arrived, the commotion was going to spread further, thus depending on the situation, certain strings may need to be pulled with regard to the authorities. As for Honatsu... No idea. He looked like he was trying to assist the superintendent but it was possible that he simply did not like running. No, before that, Haruaki had felt that Honatsu was keeping his distance from Pendragon and the Draconians the whole time, trying to avoid contact as much as possible—

"Muu!"

Hearing Fear groan, Haruaki looked up to see a familiar petite figure ahead. Dressed in a sailor-style school uniform with a waist pouch and hair styled into buns as usual, it was Ontenzaki Satsuko.

"It's just ahead not too far away. Let's talk while walking."

The destination was apparently farther. The group slowed down temporarily before speeding up after Satsuko joined them.

The place they were running towards was somewhere in the mountains after taking a turn directly from the path where the slasher incident had taken place. With many trees surrounding them and a narrow asphalt path underfoot, rather than a road for vehicles, it seemed more like a walking trail for tourists to admire the scenery. As one would expect in summer, the sea was more popular than the mountains, right? Anyway, the place was completely deserted.

"Umm... H-Hello again, Commander."

"Hi, Squishy-ko. Are you squishy today too? If there's time later, perhaps we can have a bit of squishy-ing after so long."

"Y-Yes... If there's time... Sure..."

Satsuko looked down with her face red in embarrassment. Riko bared her fangs savagely again.

"I've never heard 'squishying' as a verb! What are you trying to do!? Something dirty? It must be something dirty, right!?"

Running alongside Haruaki, Konoha sighed in exasperation.

"These people are so noisy..."

"Agreed. We're approaching the phantom slasher, so I hope everyone could be slightly more quiet."

"I agree with the shameless brat too. Also, Satsuko."

"Yes?"

"You two wouldn't be interested if this was just an ordinary phantom slasher, right? To start tailing without hesitation—Is it because you noticed *it's someone involved in our circles?*"

Hearing Fear say that, Satsuko smiled and replied:

"As expected of you, Fear-san, what an astute observation! Fourt was the one who said: 'There appears to be a presence from some kind of curse.' Then almost at the same time, we heard a scream and rushed over to have a look, then we saw someone injured and a very clearly suspicious person holding a weapon. It really was obvious from first sight that the perpetrator had attacked the victim with that weapon. And lately, Satsuko has been looking for a weapon, wondering if that weapon might be worth a try to see if it's usable~ So we chased—"

"Meaning that you intend to steal the weapon by seizing the right moment? Seriously, you're still incurable... By the way, are you that desperate for a weapon?"

"Yes, weak little Satsuko definitely still needs a weapon in order to become stronger~ Or rather, this is partially because of you guys, Fear-san~ After losing to you last time, you took away all of Satsuko's weapons and it's been hard to replace them with Wathes on the same level. Satsuko really had a tough time... Oh dear, however, it is evident that someone like Satsuko can't easily get a hold of good tools, what with poor luck, short height and being so weak, with a stout-waisted figure too."

Satsuko nodded seriously for one moment, pouted the next and went gloomy for another, a multitude of facial expressions changing rapidly. Fear went hmph.

"Who cares about you! So, what does that weird weapon look like?"

"Umm—Oh, rather than have someone like Satsuko explain, Satsuko thinks that it's faster if you see it for yourself. Looks like we're almost there too."

At this moment, a girl in a cape silently descended in front of them. Fourteen. She had probably been following the phantom slasher closely in Satsuko's place just now. Throwing a glance at the group, she said:

"Just around the corner, walking calmly and confidently."

"Yes! Don't let the culprit escape!"

Fear finally accelerated with momentum like a runaway car that was challenging a mountain peak, turning around the corner that Fourteen had indicated.

The right hand side was a concrete reinforced slope while the left hand side was a not particularly sturdy guardrail. Up ahead was the lower part of the slope where trees were growing. Visibility was fairly open with the sparkling sea surface in view past the foliage.

The person walking along the center of this deserted path looked back without hurrying. Haruaki caught his breath while taking a gulp.

"That's...!"

"The phantom slasher? Ha, definitely looking very weird."

Fear was right. There were two suspicious points at first glance. One was the spear in the person's hand. Without any particularly glamorous ornaments or design, it was a spear consisting of a straight shaft and a sharp tip. The person holding this spear was most likely female. One could not say for sure because the person's face was obscured behind a helmet resembling a visor, leaving only the cheeks and mouth visible—Naturally, this was the second suspicious point.

Apart from that, she was wearing clothing providing ease of movement, but it was no ordinary outfit because it definitely gave the impression that the wearer was dressed that way while conscious of "battle." It looked somewhat like armor, an outfit that was halfway between light armor and fabric-based clothing.

Turning her helmet towards them, she appeared to exhale.

"Fear-in-Cube huh... I found you a bit too quickly. That said, it was originally just a matter of time in the first place."

"To think you know my name, you are involved in this world as expected."

Fear frowned and muttered whereas Konoha yelled with a furrowed brow:

"Why are you hurting people like a phantom slasher!? Answer me!"

"I—have no obligation to answer."

"Either way, it must be related to some curse, right? Absolutely ridiculous. Also, allow me to confirm one matter—"

Saying that, Kirika glanced behind her. As could be expected of someone on the path pursuing strength, Pendragon was breathing hard at all. Shrugging his shoulder with Riko attached, he said:

"Let me clarify beforehand, I don't know her. She's not one of our members... Right?"

"Correct. Satsuko doesn't know that person."

"A single 'agreed' is enough to explain it all."

Pendragon threw the question at Satsuko and Fourteen who nodded readily. "I have never seen her either." Kotetsu testified as well. In that case—

"I'm quite bothered by that outfit that looks like armor. Speaking of armor, you'd think of knights. Are you from the Knights Dominion?"

Fear jumped to conclusions based on appearances without thinking, but unexpectedly, the other side admitted it readily.

"Indeed, I am part of the mission to sweep this world clean of all cursed tools."

"What bold words. Still, I wish you'd announce your name like a knight."

"It would be unpleasant enough to make me shudder and vomit nonstop if you lot were to call my name. However, a knight's etiquette must be upheld—just call me Sleif."

"Slave... huh? That's quite a lowly name for a knight."

"...Think whatever you want. Indeed it is so."



Due to the helmet covering her eyes like a visor, her expression could not be seen with only her cheeks and mouth visible. Just by looking at these parts of the face, one could tell that she was still calm and collected, although her lips had twisted in disgust just as claimed back when she said that hearing them call her name would displease her.

Her helmet moved slightly, thus indicating a shift in her gaze. After a period of time which felt like she was confirming something—

"The one over there... Maximilian Pendragon, I suppose...?"

"Haha~ Anyway, we're just here to watch and have no intention of taking part."

Almost at the same time as Sleif's murmuring, Pendragon explained, stuffing his hands into his pockets and swiftly retreating. Naturally, Riko, who was clinging to him, and Granaury stayed with him.

"Hmph, who knows how far you guys can be trusted... Kirika, anyway, I'm leaving Haruaki in your hands. Be careful."

"I understand."

"Don't go too crazy either, Fear!"

Fear did not respond. Staring at the opponent's spear warily, she took out her Rubik's cube from her parka's pocket and took a step forward.

"So, the one called Sleif, back to the question just now. I'll ask again, why are you hurting people?"

"Words coming from a calamity-spreading Wathe sure smell bad. The act of conversing is truly unpleasant. I shall answer only one more time—I have no obligation to answer you."

Haruaki saw Fear's face twitch then—

"Looks like there's no point in asking, after all, there can't be any respectable reason, right? I can't let you do weird things anymore, so you must be captured first! Also, whose mouth are you calling smelly? I'll curse you!"

"On the other hand, I don't really think she said that!"

As though declaring "I absolutely won't let you get away," Fear and Konoha both charged to close the distance.

"...No helping it..."

Sleif murmured. Just as Haruaki thought she was going to ready the spear in her hand, unexpectedly, she swiftly secured it behind her back. Instead, she drew a sword from a scabbard at her waist.

The blade was quite long but very slender, probably what one would call a rapier? A sword whose main purpose was for thrusts. It looked light and easy to control, but—

"Ha! Do you really think something like that can block attacks!? Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»!"

Fear raised the giant chopping blade up high and swung hard. Whether mass or volume, it far surpassed the enemy's weapon in these two aspects. Haruaki originally thought the result would be obvious enough but—

"What!?"

It stopped. With just a quiet "clang!", Sleif's rapier blocked Fear's executioner's blade. Sleif's movements were so light that even an observer like Haruaki found them bizarre. The expected heavy impact from Fear's motion seemed to have been entirely sucked into somewhere else—

"Why you little—!"

Fear renewed her spirits and raised her hatchet for a horizontal sweep. However, Sleif turned swiftly and pointing the tip down, used the rapier to block the attack.

The hatchet was stopped again. The instant Fear clicked her tongue, Sleif had already withdrawn the rapier tip and retreated, proceeding to use unnaturally light movements to block Konoha's series of knifehand strikes.

"Hmm... What kind of blocking move is this? It feels truly disgusting on every impact...!"

"Disgusting? How dare you say that when you and your kind are disgusting existences... Hoo, hmm..."

Sleif began to make exhaling sounds once in a while, but due to the helmet covering her eyes, her expression still could not be read. She continued to use a slender and fragile sword to block Fear and Konoha's attacks.

"So... This is a cursed sword as well!?"

"Indeed, it is too unusual to have lasted this long without breaking. The feeling on impact is also very odd."

"Shut up, Wathes. You're rotting my ears."

Clink! Clonk! Clank! The impact sounds were faint and fragile, difficult to imagine from the crossing of blades between lethal weapons. The attacks were being blocked unnaturally. Despite the tough looking battle, Fear and Konoha did not give up.

"Ha! It's been so long since the last time I met a knight very much in the style of the Knights Dominion! Let me ask a question, do you have any connection to that woman—Lilyhowell? Are you chasing after her!?"

"Don't know. That woman is just a traitor."

"Just a traitor huh? That woman is dead, you know? Fighting Nirushaaki to a draw, she avenged her fallen comrades!"

"This I know, but it has nothing to do with me."

No connection to Lilyhowell? Haruaki was quite surprised. Given a knight from the Knights Dominion, he would have thought Lilyhowell would be the main reason. Then why had Sleif appeared here?

Just as Haruaki was thinking over these things, someone rapidly sped past him. Someone who could not hold back any longer.

"Move aside!"

"Nwah!"

Shoving Fear away, Kotetsu focused his center of gravity on his tiger claw and attacked Sleif. A straight line attack prioritizing power. However, his tiger claw did not surpass her rapier either. Kotetsu stepped back for now and clicked his tongue.

"—Muramasa-sama, pray allow me to assist you."

"Not a problem, but don't forget to spare her life."

The trio of Fear, Konoha and Kotetsu launched wave after wave of attacks. Sleif continued to retreat while taking care not to get hit, using light and nimble sword moves to block all attacks—But not once did she ever switch from defense to offense. What was she planning? Fear, Konoha and Kotetsu gradually became cautious.

Meanwhile, Sleif's weird breathing was getting increasingly frequent.

"Mmm... Ooh, kuh... Ha, ah...!"

After issuing a grunt of disdain, her breathing rhythm suddenly sped up, then as though reaching some kind of maximum, she panted especially loudly—By this point, her body finally gave some kind of reaction. A violent shake of her shoulders. Drool dripping from her slightly gaping mouth. Squeezing the inside of her thighs together.

"Guh, ah... This extent, should be enough..."

Instead of panicking from her body's reactions, she kicked the ground to back away greatly as though she had expected this from the start. But still, she was not able to secure enough distance to shake off Fear, Konoha and Kotetsu. The trio chased her relentlessly and closed in. For the first time, Sleif now showed a stance not for defense.

She raised the rapier in her hand lightly.

Although her opponents clearly had yet to enter the range of her rapier's tip, she swung downwards.

What was she doing? Haruaki's puzzlement only lasted an instant.

Even though the blade was not within range of the opponents, even though it looked like an empty swing...

It was still undoubtedly—An attack.

"W-What—!?" "Gah!" "Muramasa-sama!"

The unnaturalness of the situation was identical to how the rapier had blocked their attacks. The scene before them was contrary to "the natural conclusion based on expectations."

Unbelievably, what swung out from the rapier was a slashing mass, visible to the naked eye. It was like a spatial distortion imbued with sharpness, so large in scale and power that it was impossible to imagine that slender blade had released it. Like a large-caliber artillery shell, like a runaway train, the slashing mass flew towards Fear, Konoha and Kotetsu with powerful pressure.

Probably out of instinct, the trio instantly leaned close together and counterattacked the slicing pressure in full force. The executioner's blade, the knifehand strike, the tiger claw. Nevertheless, their power was still not enough to resist. The trio was sent flying in different directions.

(Oh no, hold on, it's even coming over here...!)

After the giant, overwhelming and tangible mass of slicing pressure knocked the trio away, it continued to fly in a straight line without slowing down, ripping apart the asphalt, chopping down trees on the roadside in its wake—

"...Riko."

"No other way, I guess~ Here I go—!"

Then Haruaki saw it. Pendragon suddenly took a step forward and extended his arm. Still clinging to his arm, Riko poked her little head out in front of his fist and chopped the air with her hand as though joking around. This action alone was enough to produce a strange "smack!" as though distorting the space, whereupon the tangible slashing attack was deflected to the side. After sweeping past Haruaki's group, it smashed into the railing behind them and disappeared in the air above the seashore.

"Ah! I never thought it'd hurt so much! Damn~ Why do I have to do this kind of thing..."

Riko shook her fist with a frown on her tiny face. Pendragon stroked her head with his other hand.

"There there, this is called in for a penny, in for a pound. You did well, Riko."

"B-But you must praise me more. It's not like it'll make me happy, but, umm, it's out of the kindness of my heart so that your efforts don't go to waste! So, uh~ I permit you to stroke slightly harder!"

Ignoring the noise on Pendragon's side, the trio of Fear, Konoha and Kotetsu landed and rolled on the ground before looking in Haruaki's direction with shock.

"Haruaki, Kirika! Are you okay!?"

"Yeah, we're... Oh."

Haruaki suddenly noticed that his body had acted on its own accord to embrace Kirika beside him by the shoulders. Her body warmth. The fragrance of her hair.

"...!"

But the instant she noticed, Kirika raised her hand and shoved Haruaki's body away lightly. After seeing her own hand's movements, Kirika's eyes wandered as though in shock. It looked like hers was a subconscious action as well.

Feeling a slight air of rejection, Haruaki was rendered speechless. For several seconds, the two of them could only stared into each other's eyes. He recalled what had happened before the current situation developed. Before Pendragon's side made their visit. His slip of the tongue under the parasol. Her feelings. What he must do, no matter what—

Kirika was the first to shift her gaze away. As though trying to hide the cause, she turned to face forward.

Looking at the asphalt ground that had been gouged and scraped violently with straight-line trail, Pendragon muttered quietly. Like a child who had found a new toy, he seemed excited, enjoying the moment.

"Haha~ What amazing power. But why didn't she use this move from the start? Does it require intense concentration? Or it needs to store up something first...? Hmm."

Meanwhile, Fear, Konoha and Kotetsu were staring with a frown at the source of the slicing.

Despite the three of them losing balance completely—the reason why the enemy had not followed up with further attacks was most likely because—

There were no remaining signs of anyone in front of them.

Part 5

Night fell. The day when many things happened was also about to end.

Haruaki's group had returned to the Yachi residence, spending their time individually as they wished. After finishing dinner and doing the dishes, Haruaki walked to his room while thinking about the day's occurrences.

According to Kuroe who had treated and bandaged the victim together with Zenon, the man who had suffered the phantom slasher's assault was safely loaded onto an ambulance. His life was not in danger. Truly a big relief despite the misfortune.

In the end, the Draconians had not made any strange moves. After meeting up with the superintendent again, there was nothing important for now. Pendragon's next plans was apparently "time to gather back the other members living in this country, since it's a rare chance." In other words, they were going to remain on standby for a while at that sea. Haruaki also wondered, although they were staying on the sea far from the shore in an attempt to be inconspicuous, wouldn't they still be considered suspicious ships? But having heard that the Dragon Island essentially drifted through all the seas in the world, surely they must be quite adept at political maneuvering.

And after retrieving all members in this country—Who knew what would happen next.

"After Nirushaaki's death, the Number Two seat is now vacant. But it'd be too boring if the empty spot gets filled by ranking everyone up starting with Number Three. Might as well hold a tournament..."

While parting ways, Pendragon remarked with a childish look on his face, but—

"Who cares about you guys! Anyway, just hold it somewhere far away from us!"

Fear's response represented everyone. Although it was concerning, the conclusion at the current stage was that seeing as Pendragon had not done anything so far, there was nothing they could do about him.

(Sigh, if only this could continue with nothing else happening...)

After hearing that Pendragon was the Commander of the Draconians, Haruaki taken greatly by surprise but felt truly relieved that they had no need to fight at the moment. If possible, he wanted these peaceful times to continue forever. However, it was still unsettling that Sleif's whereabouts were unknown after her escape...

Haruaki sighed.

Then pulling open his room's sliding door, he found an unfamiliar object on his table. Tied with a ribbon, a box roughly the size of a lunchbox. Walking over for a closer look, he found a note under the box. Written on it were the words: "Happy Birthday! I gave it a lot of thought, but in the end, I decided to give you the birthday present first. How you use it is freely up to you, Haruaki, but feel free to consult me if you feel lost. Dad"—

Haruaki instantly felt all strength drain from his shoulders. Birthday present? How to use it was freely up to him? It wouldn't be cash inside, would it? He could not reject the possibility. After all, it came from that bastard Pops.

There were more words at the bottom: "P.S. I'll be away from home for a while with some things to do, but I really plan on coming back straight away this time. I'm sorry!"...

Ha! Haruaki laughed out loud. This again? After doing everything possible to make a mess of things, he vanished without a word at his own convenience again. There ought to be limits to irresponsibility. Speaking of which, due to Pendragon and Sleif's sudden appearances putting a wrench into things, Honatsu still owed them the explanation of why he became a woman. Thinking it was a perfect opportunity, Honatsu must have decided to ride the wave and leave things unexplained. How terrible. And he clearly promised them. Just let him go wherever he pleased. Indeed, don't come back ever again—

"Haruaki? Umm... Hmm~ Uh..."

"Fear? What's up? Did something happen?"

Haruaki looked back to see Fear fidgeting at the doorway. After he called to her, she seemed to steel her resolve and took a step into the room... But then she started fidgeting suspiciously again. She kept her hand behind her back all this time, probably holding something.

"No, umm, uh... Is it considered something...? Although I think it's better to do it while it's still today, but so much happened today already, so I thought it's better to wait until the mood has calmed down, to leave a better impression or something like that... Yeah, anyway, I'm here already but still very hesitant... I guess."

"I really don't get what you're trying to say."

"S-So, what are you doing? Are you currently bored out of your mind? Or are you very tired already from too much stuff happening today, so you don't feel like doing anything more?"

Fear asked while grinning unnaturally. Asking what he was doing—

Haruaki glanced at the box on the table, frowning. Given by the bastard Pops who had run off somewhere without keeping his promise, this whatever gift that might possibly be cash. Haruaki was in no mood to open it. To be frank, even looking at it made him annoyed.

Hence, Haruaki shoved the box to a corner of the table with the back of his hand, speaking at the same time:

"My exhaustion has increased thanks to that bastard Pops right now. Seriously, what present? It looks like he's gone off to who knows where again, although I think that's actually for the best."

"So that box is actually the present from Honatsu? Muu... Muumuu, really? I suppose. It's true that the current timing is a bit—"

"What timing?"

"No... No no, nothing at all! There's nothing at all~ I just happened to be curious that Honatsu disappeared after eating dinner and right now, with perfect timing, the mystery is solved~ Something like that!"

Refusing to turn her back to Haruaki the whole time, Fear kept stepping back with her hand still hidden behind her. Hmm? Haruaki cocked his head when—

"Take that~"

"Ooph!?"

Just as Fear was trying to leave the room, she suddenly jumped. While attacking Fear's bottom with a violent shoving move from sumo wrestling, Kuroe made her appearance. Pushed back into the room, Fear looked at her in protest but Kuroe spoke with her usual gaze of blankness:

"This kind of thing must be given on the day after all. Once the day is past, the excitement of giving presents will recede a bit~ So to give Ficchi a push, let me give mine first. Here, Haru, happy birthday~ By the way, there's no cooling-off period for this, so no exchanges or refunds."

"O-Oh okay, thank... you...?"

Instead of bringing her hand out from her back, Kuroe used her hair to secure something behind her then handed it over to him. In any case, Haruaki accepted the gift first, but—

It was small enough to wrap one's arms around it in a hug, made of soft fabric and cotton, something like a plushie... or resembling a doll. Basically a doll of a super-deformed girl with long black hair. Petite in stature with blank, hazy eyes, indeed, it was precisely the one in front of his eyes—

"Isn't this you!?"

"Th-That's totally Kuroe—!"

Fear blinked in shock while staring at the doll. Kuroe nodded with satisfaction.

"Mmm-hmm, it's a specially made Kuroe-chan plushie. After pestering the owner of the crafts shop in the shopping district again and again, I really made this by myself, stitch by stitch. You must treasure it properly."

"...Uh... Hmm, sure... But what would I use this for..."

"You decide how to use it! You can use it for decoration or a body pillow during sleep, or even absolutely unmentionable things! Just treat it as the real me, to do whatever you want... Say, why are you turning the plushie over and trying to feel what's inside?"

"Uh, I'm checking to see if there are recording devices or pinhole cameras."

"Very regrettably, I had to reluctantly give up on those due to a lack of time and money."

"Could you please give that up forever! By the way... You didn't place your hair inside it based on a principle like "speaking of dolls, this is the way to do it," did you? If it suddenly moves in the middle of the night, it'd be super scary."

"..."

"Why are you looking away?"

Despite various worrying aspects, this was definitely something Kuroe had made for him personally with her time and effort. Despite the doll being an unexpected present very much in her style, Haruaki did not feel inconvenienced. While praying in his heart that the doll did not contain any horrifying mechanisms, he placed it on a bookshelf for now.

"So... Your turn, Ficchi."

"U-Umuu... But..."

Kuroe circled around to Fear's back and said as though pushing her:

"I'm going to reveal your embarrassing exploits if you don't give him the present~ Like the first present you picked before this one—"

"W-Wah—! I get it, I get it! Fine, I'm giving it to him! Oooh... Here!"

Now Haruaki finally understood what was the object Fear had been hiding behind her back all this time. Like Kuroe's, this was a birthday present for him.

Fear closed her eyes and forcefully brought the object to the front. Haruaki reflexively leaned back and asked:

"Oh, this is... a frying pan... right?"

"Yes, it's a frying pan."

A shining brand-new piece of kitchen equipment. In a color popular with the masses, it featured sleek lines despite the modest impression. Due to Fear holding the frying pan by the handle, Haruaki was thinking it would not have any packaging, of course, but for some reason—

"Tied on it... there's a bow."

"P-Presents are supposed to have bows, right!? Uh, in the beginning when I told the salesman it was a gift, he helped me wrap it up and tie a bow, but I didn't like the lumpy look which wasn't very cute. After trying different failed attempts with the shopkeeper, this is the final result—W-What now? Do you have any objections!?"

"Ufufu~ Ficchi is so cute~ I really wanna hug you tight~"

Kuroe stood on tiptoe and stroked the back of Fear's head. Thrusting the frying pan with the bow as though she were holding a hero's sword, Fear glared viciously at Haruaki.

Haruaki laughed and received the frying pan from Fear's hand.

"—Thank you. This looks like it'll be very handy."

"R-Really? Exceelent. Listen carefully, you must use this frying pan from now on and continue cooking delicious food for me! This was a gift prepared with these intentions. No cutting corners, got that?"

"Haha, I'll do my best."

"That's what I'm looking forward to as well. You also have to use the kitchen knife I gave you for Christmas... Oh right, Ficchi originally wanted to give you a kitchen knife as a present, but after buying it, she remembered I already gave one for Christmas, so she went pale and screamed: 'Now the present is repeated! I'm such an idiot! Uwahhhh what should I do!?' while twisting and rolling about one moment, crying and hammering my back during another. Ficchi really was unbelievably cute in her state of panic—"

"H-Hey—! You ended up tell the story after all, I'll curse you! That was just a tiny tiny mistake and I successfully got a refund, so it's totally fine! It was a bit close, but in the end, there's no problem!"

"Haha... But you don't have to be so serious. Even if I received a kitchen knife, I'd still use it with gratitude."

Haruaki spoke in a relaxed tone of voice but hearing that, Fear suddenly looked down. After a while&mdah;

"...Of course I'm serious."

"Hmm?"

"You... probably hate days like birthdays, right? You probably don't have any wonderful memories of them, right? But this is still a day to remember, isn't it? The significance here is definitely very important."

Haruaki looked into Fear's eyes. They were very sincere.

"Such as receiving presents like this, then when your birthday comes around next year again, you'll surely think back to the previous year's birthday, right? Recalling presents from that time, memories from that time. There are very few days that can leave behind memories for a year. So it must be the same for you. A day serving as a trigger to recall the past, for it to turn out to be your own day of birth, don't you find that kind of romantic?"

"Maybe... I guess."

Also, saying that, Fear relaxed her expression slightly.

"I definitely know the meaning of giving presents. A birthday present is for telling someone: thank you for being born in this world. Whether you or anyone else, this fact probably became taken for granted, so it was forgotten. But this is my first time celebrating a birthday, so I won't forget. I believe this is a very important and new experience."

Fear did not look away. Like an innocent child, like a forgiving and tender mother, she smiled and said:

"Haruaki, I am truly thankful from the bottom of my heart that you appeared here. I'm also very thankful that you were born on this day—"

Her expression was too gentle.

It ended up making Haruaki feel that she was reprimanding him: don't say things that make others sad. Like telling him: how could birthdays not be important? This is a day to remember that must be taken seriously, for it only takes place once a year.

Hence, feeling a little apologetic, Haruaki smiled in return at the same time and said:

"Although I find birthdays to be tricky affairs, I don't hate them. Yeah. Honestly... Thank you very much, Fear."

"R-Really? That's good to hear."

Then I'll be off—Fear turned around with her face bright red. As though in revenge, she also pushed the snickering Kuroe out by her back, preparing to leave the room. At this moment, Haruaki recalled something important and decided he'd better tell her.

"Oh by the way, it's possible you haven't realized yet..."

"Hmm?"

"You have a birthday too, it's in September."

Fear suddenly paused in her movements, turning her head back all at once with a doll-like motion.

"What?"

"This is natural. Umm, perhaps too natural, to the point that I don't even feel sorry about deciding without telling you."

"W-When? W-Where did I get that kind of day—"

"Don't ask such a silly question. It's just like your reasoning earlier... The day you remember clearest from a year ago. For example, *when you tasted rice crackers for the very first time in your life*... Something like that."

The color of comprehension gradually crept onto Fear's face.

"Really... I also have... a birthday huh. Ehehe."

"Oh~ That's wonderful, Ficchi, we must have a grand celebration when that day comes!"

"Yes! Indeed—I'm really looking forward to it!"

Thus, Fear had a smile all over her face. Kuroe was smiling too.

Haruaki could not help but think, perhaps next year, he might no longer feel so troubled by his own birthday—

But at least this day today was not going to end so peacefully.

At this moment, noisy footsteps running across the corridor were heard.

"Bad news!"

Konoha poked her head into the room with a panicking expression. Fear put away her "ehehe" smiling face in alarm and pouted to disguise her embarrassment.

"S-Stop scaring people, damn Cow Tits, I'll curse you! What bad news?"

"On the television! The news just reported a phantom slasher!"

"It got on the news huh? Yeah, I don't blame them."

"The superintendent said he'd pull some strings around to prevent the incident from getting too big, but there's nothing to be surprised about it appearing on the news—"

"That's not the issue here!"

Konoha shook her head forcefully then immediately continued:

"Just today alone, there were four incidents! In other words... After we allowed her to escape, she seems to have committed three more slasher incidents elsewhere!"

"What...!?"

Haruaki was rendered speechless. Fear stared sharply at Konoha.

"Were they all done the same way?"

"The report did not give any details about how the crimes were committed, but I fear they are the same. On the television, they said that what was common to all cases was that each victim was stabbed by a sharp object."

Fear gritted her teeth hard, her eyes filled with impatience.

"It really is that girl? I shouldn't have let her escape had I known. What the heck is she trying to do? And why—"

"Currently, her objective doesn't matter at all, right!? In any case, we cannot ignore these phantom slasher incidents. This puts everyone in town at risk. Who knows who else would become victims."

"Yeah, we have to stop her..."

While the trio stared at one another solemnly, a carefree musical tone contrary to the mood was heard. It was the doorbell. Who could it be this late? Puzzled, Haruaki still went to the front door.

"Coming coming~ I'm opening the door now... Oh it's you, Class Rep."

"Sorry... for bothering you this late."

Kirika appeared at the door. After a simple greeting, she presented a paper bag.

"It's nothing... important. Indeed—It's just because I haven't given you your birthday present yet. Just a small gift, an apron. It's got many pockets and prioritizes functionality, I think it's quite nice and it has a different color from the one at my home... No, I don't mean anything special, it's just a good apron that prioritizes functionality. The apron at your house is already very old and it's also because I borrow your apron frequently... This isn't anything expensive, so I'd be very happy if you're willing to accept it."

"Th-Thank you. So, putting this aside, Class Rep..."

"Hmm...?"

Haruaki originally wanted to ask: "Are you okay?"

Kirika did not look right. Haruaki could not place his finger on it, but overall, she was not the usual Kirika. Expression, demeanor, voice, all was lacking in vitality, spirit and strength.

However, after hearing his voice, she looked up and showed a smile on her face.

A rather absentminded look.

Even so, her lips still squeezed out the shape of a smile.

"What's the... matter?"

Seeing that, Haruaki found himself inexplicably speechless.

Definitely something was not right. However, he did not know if he ought to ask. Why? Was it because of what happened during the day? Because he had run away from the answer? No, he did not think that was all to it. Although there was no evidence, he somehow felt that the reason was not limited to that—

"No, uh... Would you like to come inside? At least have a cup of tea—"

"Don't bother, it's already quite late. I really came over just to give you the present."

Then lightly saying "goodbye," she turned around and disappeared outside the door very readily, step by step.

Haruaki wanted to say something to her but could not find any words.

All he could do was silently watch as the darkness of the night swallowed her.

Part 6

An hour or two prior to visiting the Yachi residence...

Kirika was lying face down on the sofa in her apartment, recalling what had happened during their battle against Sleif. She had pushed him away when he was trying to protect her—

(Why would I... do that...?)

Immediately, she recalled those words he had uttered.

—If only the status quo could be maintained forever.

(...!)

Later, he had tried his best to mend the situation. He promised her he would answer her after thinking carefully. But those words, those words that had slipped out unintentionally, it was undeniable fact that those words had existed in his heart.

Only unease kept growing.

Was her confession going to be disregarded as not even a confession? Perhaps she was not even seen as a romantic prospect in the first place. Forced to feel this so concretely, it was very painful.

Defeat would not have mattered. But it would be too cruel if she were forbidden from standing on the battlefield at all.

Why? Because she had only been friends with him all along? Had their time together as friends been too long? Because unlike the case with the Japanese sword, they had not accumulated enough personal time together? Or perhaps—

"I knew it, this is... the cause huh...?"

Kirika turned herself over with her back lying on the sofa and pulled at her collar. The black leather bondage suit, «Gimestorante's Love». That inescapable contempt of hers was reflected on her retina.

She exhaled in self-mockery.

She did not want to think, but it was a fact that this thing existed here. It would be absolutely ridiculous if she were to dismiss the possibility. At least it was one of the possible reasons. It would be unnatural instead if she were to rule out that type of thinking. Hence—

"As expected, a woman who wears this kind of thing... is merely big trouble whose confession won't even be regarded as a confession—?"

Trembling, she murmured stiffly to herself.

Clearly she should believe in him. She really hated herself for saying such pessimistic words.

In the end, she still could not escape this cursed garment. A sense of despair, which could be considered all too familiar to her, surged in her heart again after a long period of absence. No matter when or where, this curse always restrained her. She had originally accepted this and also decided to carry it while moving forward, but—

She closed her eyes, without thinking anything, she simply said in her heart: How easy things would be if only someone could muster full force and rip this outfit apart together with her body. Absolutely ridiculous. Everything was so... absolutely ridiculous...

Just at this moment, her cellphone rang from the table on the side. Who was it? Them? She was just planning to drop off the birthday present later. Should she inform them first? But wouldn't it be better to go without warning for a sense of surprise? No, but right now, facing each other was a bit awkward, so it would be better not to make a big deal out of things—

These thoughts circled and crossed one another in Kirika's mind while she picked up the cellphone but was taken aback for a moment. Shown on the screen was a string of unfamiliar numbers. Who was it?

"Hello?"

'Hi, it's been a while, Kirika. I would be very pleased if you could listen to me without hanging up on me.'

By the time she heard 'it's been,' Kirika's finger had already reached towards the power button reflexively. She wanted to vomit. The most hated man in the entire world. The man who had forced her to wear this cursed suit. Her own elder brother—Yamimagari Pakuaki.

The only reason why she had not hung up was purely because the muscles of her finger were acting abnormally for the moment. It was only because right now, she could not be bothered to press her thumb down swiftly, that was all.

In order to let the other side hear it, she sighed with displeasure at the receiver.

"...What business do you have?"

'You don't like to beat about the bush, right? Then I'll be upfront. I want to make you a deal.'

"A deal? Absolutely ridiculous. Listen carefully, I—"

'I expected you to say that, so let me first tell you what kind of reward you're in for. Based on that, you can decide whether or not you want to listen to me.'

For some reason, Pakuaki's voice sounded very gentle. How nauseating. There must be a problem with my brain. Absolutely ridiculous. I must be too exhausted if I think that. I have grown weak.

"Reward...?"

Given her current state, it was incurably correct.

At the worst possible timing, extremely correct.

Hence—

Those words—like the whispers of the devil, that was why they burrowed unimpeded into...

The ears of she who had grown weak. The ears of she who was recalling despair.

Then they made her spine tremble intensely.

'Kirika, if I were to say... *There exists a method to remove your «Gimestorante's Love» and without you dying, what would you do?*'

Currently, having given the present to Haruaki, Kirika was rapidly making her way along the streets at night.

She was clenching her fist tightly and biting down hard on her teeth. She did not care even if she might shatter her teeth. After all, they would heal rapidly.

Her destination was not her own unit in the apartment building.

Instead, it was a deserted parking lot—She had agreed to meet someone there.

"My statement: honest words that I never expected you to come."

"...I also feel the same way, although this truly is absolutely ridiculous."

Appearing out of the darkness was the dark-skinned girl in the lab coat—Un Izoey. That man's subordinate.

Kirika glared at her and clenched her fist even harder.

"This is the last time. Undoubtedly the last time in my life. Only this once, one more time—I've decided to believe that guy's words."

This was absolutely not "trust." Kirika added in her mind. This was so-called credence, the act of believing and using... Simply using. Absolutely nothing more.

"No matter what, I only act according to orders, I clarify this clarification. About this operation, how much do you know already?"

"...Right now, the Lab Chief's Nation has very fortuitously obtained the location of the knight known as Sleif. The random slashings are suspected to be due to the curse of the *spear* in her possession. What I need to do is—"

Kirika narrowed her eyes while thinking back to what Pakuaki had said on the phone and continued:

"Namely, to bring that *spear* back to the Lab Chief's Nation for your side to research. While you are fighting that knight and diverting her attention, I will use «Tragic» to steal the spear from behind."

"Truly sufficient knowledge."

Looking at Un Izoey nodding with ambiguous eyes, Kirika clenched her fist again due to the sense of suffering she could not dispel. But this should not count as betrayal to them. Probably not—

Suppose she fought Sleif together with Fear's group instead of joining forces with Un Izoey... They too thought that the spear was the reason why Sleif was attacking people randomly and would most likely destroy the spear. That was the safest method, especially with Konoha's expertise in destroying weapons, it might even be easier than stealing.

If Kirika were to explain to Fear's group the entire truth, they might be willing to take action while prioritizing the stealing of the spear. However, Kirika could not heap extra trouble upon them while they were fighting Sleif when it was for her own personal reason. The ones facing the greatest hardship would be those girls fighting on the frontlines. Or him. Kirika believed that would be wrong. Since it was for herself, she should be the one facing hardship. When handing the spear over to Pakuaki, it was already enough for her to be the only one feeling guilty.

Probably sensing something from her expression, Un Izoey said:

"About this operation, I don't plan on leaking a single word to them. I promise this kind of promise."

"A promise huh? Absolutely ridiculous..."

Did this count as some sort of considerateness? To be honest, Kirika still did not quite get what Un Izoey was thinking. After glaring at her with hostility, Kirika asked:

"You... Are you standing on Yachi and the others' side?"

"My answer: I report the fact I don't know."

Un Izoey closed her eyes for an instant and gave that answer. Then immediately, she gazed intently at Kirika. Kirika suddenly felt that she could see some kind of emotion in Izoey's eyes that was different from usual. But it was very faint, too

unclear, very difficult to articulate. Possibly confusion, possibly confoundment, possibly anxiety—and possibly... pity.

During this time, Un Izoey suddenly shifted her gaze away and muttered to herself towards the ground:

"...That reply... Definitely. If the Lab Chief said so, it must be true... What is going on? What an unknown. Cannot tell anyone—No, cannot ask anyone either—"

She definitely looked different from usual, as though bothered by something, but Kirika had no obligation to care.

"I want to end this sooner, let's go."

"My answer: yes."

The two of them started walking. As soon as Kirika relaxed her mind, many things surfaced in her thoughts, as though her body and mind were completely being controlled. About him. About the confession. About today. About the future. The curse covering her body. The deal with Pakuaki. Hence, she deliberately asked about unimportant things.

"What about Amanda?"

"Lab Chief's orders: resting today. Because she has been working nonstop lately."

"Hmm...?"

Kirika was slightly concerned. Sleif belonged to the Knights Dominion while Amanda used to be a member of the Knights Dominion. Even if she was unable to fight, she should be able to contribute information, right?

(Pakuaki even gave explicit orders... Did he deliberately exclude Amanda from this operation...? It feels slightly unnatural. But it could be just coincidence, maybe I am overthinking things...)

Kirika pondered these matters while they advanced. Soon they arrived at the destination.

It was a multi-tenant building out in the suburbs. At four stories high, the building itself was not very big. With the shop tenants apparently already closed up with dark windows, the entire building was also quiet.

"Reports say the roof of this building."

Must be an observer other than Amanda? Un Izoey reported after making a call to confirm.

"Do you know the enemy's armaments? I inquire this kind of inquiry."

Normally, Kirika would reply "who knows, absolutely ridiculous!" without deigning to give another thought, but currently, she was planning to engage the enemy together with this girl's cooperation. There was no choice but to share information.

"From what I saw, there's that spear, although it's not used for combat, as well as a rapier which can release what one could call a powerful giant, tangible, slashing attack... Imagine it as a so-called wind blade phenomenon that has been amplified to cannon-class in power. On the other hand, it seems like it needs to accumulate energy first."

"I will take care of her before that. My policy, make declaration to fight with full power from the start. Since the spear is not used in battle, it is kept on her back?"

"Yes."

"Then when the enemy is fighting me, try to get around the back as much as possible to steal spear. If she leaves the spear on the side, then it's even easier."

"I'll try as much as possible to move without exposing myself. Just do everything you can to divert her attention."

After ending this quiet conversation that was like a strategy conference, the two of them went into action. Neither of them needed to use the stairs at all. After confirming there was no one watching, Kirika extended the «Tragic Black River» towards the roof. The roof did not seem to be fenced, so she randomly took hold of a corner and shortened the black leather belt to fly up. Holding onto either protruding window frames or pipes, Un Izoey silently scaled the wall like a monkey, climbing up to the roof nimbly via the outer wall using physical technique alone.

Un Izoey arrived first and suddenly landed on the roof.

"...Hmm."

"My name: Un Izoey of the Lab Chief's Nation. I introduce this kind of name. Prepare yourself."

"The Lab Chief's Nation. A dark organization that exploits contemptible ugliness. How stomach-churning."

Slightly later, Kirika quietly peeked out from the edge of the roof to observe the situation. Un Izoey was holding a knife between her toes while Sleif had drawn her rapier as before. The two of them quickly started to fight. The spear was on Sleif's back. As one would expect, the method of quietly stealing the spear while she left it on the side was not going to work.

Kirika did not reveal herself on the roof. Instead, she used «Tragic» to move sideways along the edge of the rectangular roof, towards the opposite corner from where Un Izoey had made her arrival. After successfully reaching the best position, Kirika peeked out again to observe the situation on the roof—

"My doubt: defense with unbelievable feeling when hit, I express this kind of comment."

"Huff! Mmm... You... are great. Unprecedented. This will end very soon."

"The end is still far, I answer with this kind of answer!"

Sleif used the rapier to block the high-speed attacks executed by Un Izoey's legs one after another, still making weird panting noises in the meantime.

Judging from Un Izoey's puzzled voice and the blade impacts that were clearly too quiet, one could tell that Sleif was using that incomprehensible impact absorption ability like during the daytime. Was that a power from a curse? Or was it Sleif's own ability?

In any case, preparations were in place. Sleif happened to have her back towards Kirika who could see the targeted spear. Just by using the «Tragic Black River» to grab the spear and extract it, the theft should be easily accomplished. The time since the fighting started was roughly half the duration of the battle against Fear and the others—In other words, Sleif probably could not use that move yet. There was no reason not to take action now.

With her arms and legs clinging onto the concrete edge, Kirika ascended the roof all at once, then immediately, she extended the «Tragic Black River» towards Sleif's back—But just at that moment...

"Ah! Huff! Oh, mmmguh!"

A convulsive sound. As though surpassing some kind of limit, Sleif's entire body kept trembling nonstop.

"Ha, ah... I said just now that this will end very soon. Correct as expected. It's enough already."

Then she pulled back immediately to create distance. Just like what she did against Fear and the others, Sleif swung her weapon without her opponent in range of the tip.

Impossible! Kirika could not believe this. Why was she already able to launch the attack?

"Are you the hunter of the Lab Chief's Nation? You're as fast as rumored, which is why this can be so fast."

"What are you saying? Truly an unknown... No, no way...!"

Un Izoey frowned in shock but as though saying "you won't get your way," she sped up to close in. However, Sleif calmly swung the rapier horizontally—

"Just like greedy and filthy rats, those of you who believe yourselves to be wise men, let me tell you as a substitute for rotten food... This sword is the «Karma Speed», *which has already devoured your speed thoroughly!*"

Instantly, Kirika was struck by a revelation. What the attack needed to accumulate. The defense that absorbed all force. Putting two and two together—So that rapier's power was absorbing the *speed* of enemy attacks, then releasing the accumulated energy? In that case, Un Izoey who was *faster* than anyone would surely be the most suitable nourishment for that sword.

(Guh...!)

But by this point, she could not stop «Tragic». Go. It's almost there. Hurry!

After Sleif swung the rapier sideways, it produced an astounding mass of slicing pressure. It was the powerful and gigantic phenomenon tearing through the air. To be honest, Kirika expected Un Izoey to die. The distance was too close.

However, Un Izoey instantly jumped up, using the knife between her toes as a shield in desperation, stabbing it towards the slashing attack—But something like that could not possibly oppose it. In a split-second decision, Un Izoey decided that this would be better than standing there to take on the attack with her body helplessly sliced into two. Fortunately, Un Izoey had placed herself in midair, thus she was blown away like a doll as though she were hugging the giant slashing attack. The knife shattered into scattering pieces. Her gray hair spun while fluttering. Judging from the trajectory she was blown away, there was no way she could land back on the roof, but Kirika could only trust in the feral girl's ability to survive crises.

The «Tragic Black River» reached Sleif's while she was releasing the attack, successfully extracting the *spear* from her back.

"What..!?"

She cried out in shock while turning her visor-like helmet towards Kirika at the same time. It was too late. Also, the feral girl had left a final souvenir for Kirika.

While knocked into the air, Un Izoey swiftly curled up her body and reached towards her big toe. In the next second, she straightened herself as though her back and legs were sticks, fully extending the elastic bow that was wrapped around her big toe.

She shot in a split second.

To still be able to aim after getting blown into the air, what truly amazing marksmanship. Or perhaps, it was mere coincidence? In any case, the dart shot by Un Izoey from the air struck the rapier in Sleif's hand just as she was turning her head back, sending the sword flying.

Immediately, Un Izoey fell under the influence of gravity and Kirika could no longer see her. There were probably other buildings and trees in the area, so she was most likely going to survive. But putting that aside—

(...This will work.)

Kirika believed firmly. The enemy had let go of her weapon while she had grabbed the spear already. Next, all she needed to do was continue pulling the spear towards herself then swiftly jump down the roof to escape—

"You're not going to succeed—!"

"!"

Roaring with anger, Sleif dashed towards Kirika with speed akin to flying, her instantaneous acceleration enough to rival the «Tragic Black River»'s retraction rate. Truly impressive agility.

However, the opponent was unarmed. Even if she approached like this, she could only attack with a body slam at most. Even if Kirika fell down the building from the collision, she could escape through falling. No problem.

Just as Kirika gritted her teeth to brace herself for the incoming impact, staring at Sleif closing in on her—

Purely a single miscalculation made all her efforts gone to waste.

In order to confirm the situation first, Un Izoey returned to the building from just now.

"..."

Still expressionless, she looked around the roof. The place was so quiet that the earlier battle seemed like an illusion. There was not the slightest sound. Naturally, no one could be seen either.

However, there was an item sufficient to indicate that certain things had happened earlier.

No, could this be considered an item? It was hard to define.

Staring intently at that object, Un Izoey took out her cellphone. Barely managing to recall how to make calls from the contact list, she operated the cellphone and waited for the call to connect.

Meanwhile, she looked down at the object before her.

Indeed. Could a severed human leg actually be called an item?

The part of the body below the thigh. A clean and smooth slice. The crimson liquid splattered in the surroundings.

Flesh was slowly disappearing from the sliced surface as though melting away. Since the severed body part was left here without getting reattached, the main

body had probably started growing a new leg from the cut in order to heal the wound. In other words, that suit had made the judgment call that the second leg here was redundant.

At this moment, the call connected.

'Yes yes, it's me. How did it go?'

Since she had not contacted Un Izoey, the scene at hand could only imply one result.

Un Izoey answered lightly:

"Failure. Also, it seems she was abducted."

Chapter 3 - The Pleading Immortal Girl / "Our birth (new)"

Part 1

Burning heat. Intense pain as though bitten by countless winged ants. Cold sweat. Discomfort. Kirika looked down at her lower body—currently regenerated to the right knee. She had no idea where the bondage suit kept its memories, but whether judging from the shape of the knee or the thickness of the flesh, this was undoubtedly her leg. Contemptible to an absolutely ridiculous degree.

Kirika was currently located in what appeared to be some forest. Her hands were tied tightly behind her back, unable to move. Naturally, the «Tragic Black River» had been taken away. The same went for her lower body without saying, her severed legs were still growing. She could not even move.

"Why—abduct me?"

Sleif was standing in front of her, holding the *spear* that Kirika had failed to steal, looking down at her without saying a word. Due to the visor-like helmet, her expression was not visible either. It was impossible to judge her intent.

"Let me state for the record, I only targeted that spear because I made a deal with Yamimagari Pakuaki, so even if you ask for their goal, I can't answer you. But I owe no allegiance to the Lab Chief's Nation, so apart from that one point, I could tell you anything you want."

The enemy had taken her away to obtain information, right? Speculating that, Kirika offered her cooperation. She could not think of any other possibility, but—

"I know. You are Ueno Kirika. The owner of «Gimestorante's Love»."

After speaking like delivering a monologue, Sleif extended the spear tip towards Kirika's body. The blade's cold touch made Kirika tremble instinctively—but the spear tip merely pressed on her skin instead of piercing her flesh. After cutting open her clothing, Sleif lifted the fabric using the spear tip and stared intently at the black leather bondage suit beneath—

"What an ugly and displeasing Wathe. So repulsive that I want to puke. Immortality should not exist in this world in the first place."

Kirika bit her lip. She knew. This sort of thing. She knew it best herself. Instead of accepting Pakuaki's temptation of the devil, thinking he could solve the problem, she should have accepted this fact like in the past then move forward by overcoming trials—Right? However, nevertheless, Yachi—

Just as her thoughts were about to go on a tangent, Sleif's words brought her violently back to reality.

"Indeed, you are contemptible to a hopeless degree. But this turns out to be perfect."

"What...?"

Kirika looked up in puzzlement then felt heat.

From inside. From her chest. A cold object melded into the temperature inside, which then exploded. A hard foreign object was violating her, touching the

depths of her sensitive flesh, deeper, deeper, deeper, ever deeper, producing intense heart-piercing and bone-wrenching pain.

"! ...Ahhh, ahhhhhhhhh!"

The tip of the spear held in Sleif's hand had penetrated her chest.

Even if she tried to endure, she could not endure. Her body kept rolling. Tears fell from her eyes on their own. Oxygen, oxygen, oxygen. So painful. Calm down. She had grown accustomed to this long ago. But the enemy knew about her, knew about this suit. Crap. A small wound would not matter, but if the enemy intended to rip this garment apart thoroughly—the curse would probably activate upon the instant of this garment's destruction.

In other words, she really was going to—

Die.

"Gah! Ah, ha...!"

She must move. She must escape. She must fight.

However, all Kirika could see in her view was the blood gushing out from her chest, dripping down to dye the ground red. For some reason, Sleif also seemed to be quietly looking down from her helmet to observe this scene.

A sense of anxiety with her life on the line.

But in the next instant—as though mocking Kirika's feelings, Sleif very simply—

Pulled out the spear, liberating Kirika's flesh from the spear tip.

The emptiness of the wound. The massive open hole. Simply contact with air was unbearably painful. After the spear was pulled out, a greater volume of bleeding came from the wound. Drip drip drip. The puddle of blood by her feet. Sleif continued to watch this scene.

"An immortal is fine too, this fact is now established... Then I shall make use of you..."

What was going on? Kirika was totally lost.

Due to the severe bleeding, her view went dark all at once. The thought circuits of her brain were extinguished segment by segment. At the very least, she knew that the enemy had no intention of destroying «Gimestorante's Love» at the moment. Although she had no idea what the other side wanted, at least she was not going to die for now.

(Ha... So what on earth is she trying to do...? Absolutely... ridiculous...)

Harboring slight feelings of self-abandonment, Kirika thought to herself.

...While at the same time, she died as usual.

Part 2

"—That's all. I report this kind of report. Any questions?"

Silence was hanging over the living room. Haruaki, Fear, Konoha and Kuroe were all looked at the table, narrowing their eyes solemnly. Only Kotetsu's expression remained neutral, but likewise, he was silent.

Un Izoey swept her gaze across everyone's face in a circle. After confirming there were no questions—

"Then about future developments, I need to discuss with the Lab Chief."

She got up to walk away. At this moment, Fear looked up as though she could no longer suppress herself.

"Hold it! I still have things to say! Clearly... Clearly with an amazing master fighter like you there, why would Kirika still get—!"

"Fear! Don't say more!"

Haruaki spoke curtly, using his gaze to urge her to look at Un Izoey. After seeing her appearance, Fear went "muuguu" and fell silent. Haruaki spoke in a tone of voice trying to act unperturbed:

"Sorry, that's it for now."

"...Then excuse me, I express this wish to be excused."

Having paused, Un Izoey began walking again without looking back and left the living room—walking with a limp as though protecting one leg.

She was not unharmed. This meant that Sleif was more powerful than predicted, so it would not be right to blame Un Izoey. However, in spite of that—

"Why... Class Rep..."

"It was said that she made a deal with Yamimagari Pakuaki—information regarding Ueno-san's cursed outfit. It meant that she really wanted to know, doesn't it?"

"Hmm, although Kiririn usually acts like she doesn't care, this is probably the most important thing to her after all. I think it's been occupying her mind all along."

Scowling, Fear crossed her arms and muttered:

"That being said, Kirika clearly gave off the impression that she won't ever trust that guy again... I can't believe she agreed to a deal. What changed in her mindset?"

"Sigh, who knows? We're not Ueno-san, so it's impossible to find out."

Konoha was correct. However, Haruaki still could not help but think, was he responsible? Did his own actions act as some sort of trigger that had shaken Kirika from her principles?

Speaking of ideas—Yes. Hence, although the truth was not known, Haruaki was overcome with sorrow.

(Class Rep... I...)

Haruaki clenched his fist hard under the table. Although he could feel gazes from Konoha and the others, he pretended not to notice.

"Do you people believe the words of the dark-skinned girl? If my memory serves me correctly, she is Yamimagari Pakuaki's trusted subordinate, right?"

Kotetsu threw a glance at the living room doorway while speaking. Hearing that, Haruaki looked up and said:

"That girl is also our classmate. I don't think she's lying."

"Mmm-hmm. Then what are we going to do?"

Haruaki involuntarily replied with greater force in his voice. Too natural an answer.

"Of course we're going to rescue Class Rep, this goes without saying!"

"That's right, we must find her!"

Fear declared with an expression full of spirit, standing up with fists clenched. But in stark contrast to her, Konoha's very calm voice spoke out.

"Please wait. I have some ideas to share."

"What ideas? Tell us, Cow Tits."

"First of all, I believe we shouldn't forget that we have absolutely no idea regarding the enemy's goal. What is that member of the Knights Dominion, the one named Sleif, actually intending? For what purpose is she taking action? Unless we elucidate these issues, we must take extra caution in our actions."

"You're... not wrong."

"Also, this time, Yamimagari Pakuaki is involved in addition to the Knights Dominion. His motives are also unknown."

"Truth be told, that man's movements are difficult to predict. Although it's very regrettable."

Kotetsu closed his eyes and bowed his head, agreeing with Konoha, his voice filled with intensity.

"Also—the Draconians' fleet is still on the sea. Even if they are currently staying still, no one can tell if they will make a move in the future."

"...Very regrettably, I must agree on this point too."

While listening to Kotetsu concur, Konoha watched Haruaki intently. Haruaki could only ask in response:

"So...? Konoha, what are you trying to say...?"

"Just as I mentioned, we must be very cautious. Additional caution is absolutely not a bad thing. Listen carefully, as long as we have no idea what the Knights Dominion is plotting—for example, it's possible that all this was done for the purpose of luring out Haruaki-kun."

"That's..."

"Consequently!"

Konoha interrupted Haruaki harshly then said with sincere eyes:

"Haruaki-kun, you are not allowed to leave the house. I shall go search for Ueno-san."

"H-Hold on! Why? I also—"

"The reason is just as I've said. With the Knights Dominion, the Lab Chief's Nation and the Draconians around, I can't let you go to places where these three sources of chaos are mixed together. Absolutely!"

Saying that, Konoha stood up at the same time.

Her eyes were still fixated on Haruaki with a sincere gaze—No, it was more than sincerity. This was not the warm gaze of protection which he had always seen in the past, like that of an older sister guarding him. Inside her eyes resided an even stronger, dazzling light of resolute willpower, as though situated in a faraway place beyond arm's reach. Despite getting intimidated by her gaze, Haruaki still said:

"H-Hold on, this is too heavy-handed—"

"I know. Even if you cannot accept it, I don't care. However, I will do everything I can to make you obey, Haruaki-kun, because it is for your own good."

"Hmph, although it's a bit heavy-handed, she definitely has a point. Indeed, it's very disconcerting that we have three factions with unknown motives present at the same time. Caution and more caution would be a good thing."

"Is that so? I forget to mention, Fear-san, but please don't leave the house either. Stay here and protect Haruaki-kun. This is yours and Kuroe-san's mission."

"W-What did you say!? I really want to rescue Kirika right now!"

"Oh my, hmm, well, I don't really mind."

"Konoha, I know it's very dangerous, but I want to save Class Rep too. Besides, the more help the better..."

Just as Haruaki straightened his back and said that, another person apart from Konoha stood up. As if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I shall go."

"Yes, Kotetsu alone will be enough. He has a keen nose for blood and has spent long years on the battlefield like me, so he ought to be quite skilled in sensing presences as well."

Kotetsu nodded as though going "leave it to me!" Seeing that, Konoha continued:

"The risk will increase as soon as Haruaki-kun leaves this house. Under the current circumstances filled with uncertainty, even if Fear-san and the others stay by your side as bodyguards, it's still impossible to find the perfect balance between tradeoffs. Consequently, it's best to leave you at home with safety first as the top priority."

Konoha refused all objections. Was the situation really like that? Perhaps. Haruaki understood the logic. But even so, he still could not accept on an emotional level.

"B-But!"

"Yeah, hold on!"

"I will stay in touch regularly, is that okay? Please do not leave the house without permission. If you go out, I won't forgive any of you and will sever all ties."

Konoha ended the conversation on her own. Turning her back to their protests, she walked out of the living with perfect composure. Kotetsu followed behind her. Haruaki did not argue. Neither did he have the power to stop the two of them from leaving.

In this manner, Haruaki was left in the living room with Fear and Kuroe. With arms crossed, Fear sat down hard with displeasure.

"Jeez... I can't believe she decided all on her own! Accursed Cow Tits, what is she trying to do!?"

"Fear, what do we do...?"

Haruaki asked as though seeking help. Fear closed her eyes and thought for a while. Then opening one eye, she looked at Haruaki. Scratching her head with pouting lips, she finally sighed.

"I said so just now, although I can't accept it, she does make a good point. Running around outside with you is very dangerous. That's definitely the truth. Anyway, we can only listen to her for now."

"Is that... so...?"

"Yeah, this can't be helped. Just think positive. Maybe just by relying on those two's super investigative abilities, Kiririn will be found immediately."

"Hmph! I'll be very mad if that doesn't happen. Also, once the place is found, I don't plan on holding back. If Sleif really must be defeated in order to save Kirika, I will be going all out to relieve my stress!"

Listening to Fear and Kuroe's voices, Haruaki stared blankly at the living room doorway that Konoha had exited through, recalling her gaze.

There was a sense of being left behind by her, something he had never felt before.

He could feel that she was no longer the Konoha in the past who would always indulge him unconditionally. She was no longer the Konoha who approached him like an older sister.

She had changed.

Right, she said she wanted to change. So that was why she was doing this? This change stemmed from what had happened back then—when he gained knowledge of her lips' warmth—and her feelings?

Incomprehensible. It somehow felt contradictory and not contradictory at the same time.

(W-What is this...? Class Rep is clearly in a crisis right now, but I'm stuck here...)

Haruaki lowered his face and clenched his fist tightly.

As usual—Even more than usual...

An extremely cold sense of powerlessness made his back tremble nonstop.

Part 3

Two people were walking along the streets at night.

"—Very well. Then please let me know if any new information comes up."

Ending a phone call, Konoha exhaled. The person on the other end was the superintendent. With his assistance, she would be notified once the police received reports of a suspicion person appearing on the streets. This was just in case Sleif continued her random attacks on people even after abducting Kirika.

"...It's truly a pain when the enemy's objective is completely unknown..."

"Muramasa-sama."

"What is it?"

She looked back to see Kotetsu following one step behind, looking at her seriously.

"Is this really alright? Well—forcing that brat to..."

"There is no other way and right now, I still believe myself to be correct. Having the two of us search with full effort is the right course of action at the moment. If everyone went searching while trying to protect Haruaki-kun at the same time, there are limits to balancing both sides."

"Yes. Truth be told, I do agree on this point."

"So what you mean to say is that my attitude wasn't too heavy-handed?"

She saw Kotetsu nod once. Without needing to think, Konoha also knew what he was worrying about. Several days earlier, what they had discussed in the room. The reason why she had invaded Haruaki's bed. Simply smiling wryly in her heart, Konoha did not know whether or not she should praise him for being gentle.

"...Because I've been thinking, if I keep making contact with him while taking a position *akin to an older sister*, this isn't going to work."

She had self-awareness. She was not that narcissistic. Although she had confessed and forced a kiss on him, however—From his perspective, she was

probably still the Muramasa Konoha from before: Simply living under the same roof, akin to an older sister in identity, finally settling on being the same age as him officially after entering high school.

In that case—It was impossible to advance. Definitely.

"I won't tend to him with one-sided overprotectiveness like between siblings again. We must stand as equals from now on. Hence, even if he is unwilling, I still have to be *overprotective as his equal*, to do what I believe to be right. It doesn't matter even if I incur Haruaki-kun's anger or displeasure as a result, because this is what would be called equality."

"Yes... Although I don't quite understand..."

The pedestrian crossing light turned red. Konoha halted and sighed.

"Hoo~ Ooooh, however..."

"However?"

"Saddening things are still saddening after all—!"

Her true feelings slipped out, she lowered her head forcefully.

"...I also want to be with Haruaki-kun all the time and take action together. It's just that circumstances do not permit me to do so. Hoo~ Ahhhh, uwah—"

"M-Muramasa-sama... Please be careful. Umm, you might end up pulling off that frog's head..."

Konoha suddenly came to her senses to find herself smacking the head of the frog doll beside her. It was apparently this pharmacy's decoration. Fortunately, she had not leaked any sword aura. She did not want to have to pay for breaking it.

She must pull herself together! She renewed her spirits. Seeing the signal turn green, she started walking after leaving a final touch of the frog doll.

"...So, let's muster dedication to search. Depending on the situation, it might be necessary for us to split up and act separately. You must memorize the layout of these streets and not get lost at least."

"Affirmative!"

Konoha slowly sharpened her concentration. Using a Japanese sword's sensitivity, she searched the presences in the surroundings. Was there any abnormal change? Did anyone exude killing intent?

Kirika must absolutely be found. This was the most important, first and foremost. This was also unmistakably her true feelings.

Having only herself and Kotetsu search was the best method—Having made such a judgment, she must do everything she could to prove that her judgment was correct. Otherwise, it would turn into her using Kirika just for the sake of her own relationship with Haruaki. That would be an insult, it would be humiliation. She would never forgive herself.

Then it suddenly occurred to her.

(Back when coming to rescue me from Nirushaaki's side... What was Ueno-san feeling...)

In the end, Konoha concluded that Kirika must have felt similarly. Both of them had resolved themselves to move forward in a straight line, never running away.

Surely—

This must be the warrior's path belonging to maidens who were caught in the net of love.

"This must be what's called... absolutely ridiculous... right?"

Murmuring in mimicry of Kirika's catchphrase, Konoha exerted force on her eyes in order to pull herself together. Turning her entire body into a sensory organ, she started to spin at full speed for the one and only objective.

"Please... continue to endure a little while longer... Ueno-san..."

Spontaneously, she let slip words almost akin to a prayer.

Part 4

"Huff... Guh, ha, ah...!"

Kirika was twisting her body on the soil, feeling the texture of pebbles against her cheeks while trying to get a sense of her surroundings. It was currently nighttime and the location seem to be a forest. Still within town, probably, since the brightness of streetlights could be seen in the distance. Was it a forest in the depths of a park? No idea which park it was, however.

She felt some kind of object pulled out of her chest. Without needing to look, she knew what it was. That spear.

"Guh, haah... Ha, haha... Totally... like a corpse, being stuffed into a trunk then this happens as soon as I'm dumped out huh...? Three times already by now?"

Like a corpse. What absolutely ridiculous words. While thinking that to herself, Kirika tried her hardest to be sarcastic, grinning at Sleif in front of her. Her arms and legs were still bound, unable to move.

The expression under the helmet did not change. Kirika clicked her tongue mentally while saying at the same time:

"How I really wish for some change. Although I won't die, it still hurts. Although it's absolutely ridiculous, I am starting to get bored. Oh, if all you want is to observe the wounds healing, this it's time you stop using that spear to..."

"Shut up."

"My only entertainment is talking. Actually, you're very curious about my Wathe, aren't you? You could be more honest."

"Insult, humiliation, desecration! Like hell anyone is curious!"

"Eeee... Gi, heeha, ahhh!?"

Sleif suddenly stuck her finger into the wound in Kirika's chest. The bloody flesh squirmed with a foreign object inserted into the opening that was in the process of healing. She stirred violently and repeatedly stuck her finger in and out. The invading finger curled and scratched the interior. Liquids splashed all around. The blinking stimulation was making Kirika's body shake forward and backward. Drool dripped on its own. She kept rolling.

"Eeee... Ha, ah, ah, ah, ah!?"

"What a contemptible Wathe...! Like this, like this, like this!? Even like this, it'll still heal!?"

"Nnngh! Ah—hee, gii, kahah!"

"Worn on your body is ugly and unsightly evil that I don't even want to steal a glance at! Don't overestimate yourself!"

"Ha, haa... But..."

Kirika twisted her body as though trying to escape the pain. As though gnawing at the ground, she parted her trembling lips and said:

"I... finally know. Because of this... of mine—that's why you captured me... to harm me. You did that, because I am of use to you. Compared to harming the ordinary populace... like a phantom slasher, this is better... Haha, ha."

Kirika spoke with feelings of self-abuse.

She could hear Sleif groaning "muu" while hearing her own quickened breathing. Probably tired of playing with the wound, Sleif finally pulled her finger out. The feeling of squirming flesh returned. Kirika collapsed on the ground, spacing out at the sight of her own blood pooled in a depression.

"Indeed—I've discovered... certain things."

"...What things? Try me."

Slightly moistening her throat, Kirika swallowed a bloody-tasting liquid and said:

"Basically your goal. So far... from the first random slashing, then putting me... into the trunk and running all over the place, and pulling me outside to stab thrice with the spear. If you had attacked random victims elsewhere, then those places must have been the same, right? Because it's necessary. In other words, it's a required condition."

Sleif gave no reaction, just as Kirika predicted. How could an immortal girl on the verge of death cause a dramatic reversal of the situation just by saying a few words? Hence, Kirika was saying this purely to taunt and mock her, to convey to her: I know the secret you won't disclose, serves you right!

"—In other words, you need to have *blood* flow onto *surface soil*, right? Whenever you stabbed me, you always stared closely at the blood flowing out from the wound. And every time you committed the act, you always picked a place where the fresh blood would seep into the soil. Coincidence? Absolutely ridiculous. Even if it happened by chance just because you picked deserted areas, this town isn't that rural. There are more than enough parking lots with no people or dark alleys. But since it happened on soil each time, that means it is necessary—"

"I see. Impressive that you figured it out. Here is your reward."

"Gi, ahhhhhh!"

This time, Sleif turned the spear tip and stabbed Kirika's thigh. Not only that, she skewered her completely as though pinning Kirika to the ground.

"Bleeding twice... at the same location... what special treatment..."

"..."

"What... is your goal? Although I don't know what kind of ritual, or what kind of curse... your actions are part of, but I pray, your efforts will be in vain. Because the blood that flows from me, it either returns to the body or vanishes..."

"No cause for worry."

Sleif shifted her weight towards the spear. Intense pain erupted from Kirika's thigh as a starting point, almost ripping her entire body to shreds. Kirika silently arched her body.

"I only need to use the spear's blade to *stain the soil with fresh blood*, hence there's no issue even if the blood is cleaned off afterwards—Whether the blood returns to the body or vanishes due to supernatural reasons, the result is the same. This is already proven."

Excessive pain was making Kirika's vision start to flicker. She could only repeat Sleif's words as a question:

"...Already proven...?"

"Do you really think there has never been other immortals—alleged immortals—like yourself?"

Sleif's expression could not be read due to the helmet but her voice was calm and monotonous. Conversely, she was pushing on the spear. Using the ground where the spear was stabbed to serve as a fulcrum, she pushed back and forth, left and right, and swiveled in a mixing manner. Turned into a bloody pulp, the muscle fibers were swept into the mixer, causing Kirika to scream.

"Ahhh, ahhh, ahhhhhhhhhh!"

"No matter what you do or what deductions you make, it is meaningless. Instead of finding a random unlucky soul out on the streets every time then disposing of them secretly, it's simply easier to drag around a vessel that remains intact no matter the amount of bleeding. That's all. Shut up and bleed. That is your only function."

"Ahhh, ha! Eeeeeee—!"

After giving an extra forceful turn of the spear, Sleif kicked Kirika's bloody thigh and drew out the spear tip violently. Like a malfunctioning musical instrument,

Kirika's throat convulsed rhythmically, giving off panting noises. Sleif swung the spear to shake off viscous blood before looking down again at the writhing flesh of Kirika's wound.

"Totally filthy. A woman like a fragile protozoan with nothing but the power of immortality."

Her tone of voice was filled with scorn and derision. This time, Sleif simply kicked Kirika like a ball. Once, twice, thrice.

The repeated onslaught of pain, pain, pain. Inside the body, outside the body, her heart, everything was in immense pain. Her brain's operating speed slowed down while her consciousness was gradually buried by soil.

At this moment, in Kirika's blurry vision, she saw Sleif stop kicking her thigh and turn around. Someone was coming. To save her? Absolutely ridiculous. Impossible.

"—The knight over there, you seem quite strong. I am Kurusonzan Itaku of the Draconians. How lucky I am to discover you while on my way back to headquarters. Please fight me."

"Eyesore of a visitor. You will be forever silenced."

See, just as expected. How could it be someone to save her? Just an intruder. However, if anyone could save her, she did not mind, but it was highly improbable.

The battle scene between those two seemed very distant, very blurry, like a movie shown on the big screen.

Let them do as they wish. What Sleif said earlier was the truth, without anything that could be refuted. She was both powerless and filthy. Hence, she was unable to do anything.

(She's absolutely right. I... am this kind of thing...)

She had forgotten all along. Clearly she knew very well. Clearly back at the Lab Chief's Nation when she was undergoing experimentation repeatedly like a thing, she had admitted it. But she had forgotten.

Despite being immortal, she was more fragile than anyone. Simply a weak monster that would not die. This was herself. The woman named Ueno Kirika. Filthy, unclean, disgusting, a contemptible existence—

(Yes... Indeed...)

Kirika lay on her side, feeling the corners of her eyes get hot.

She was unable to understand what it was.

Because enveloping her heart, these absolutely grayest emotions, at this very moment—did not even permit the active will of "understanding" to surface in her cerebral cortex.

Part 5

Although they had decided to take naps in turns, it was impossible to sleep soundly. Haruaki woke up far earlier than expected, just as the sky was beginning to glow from the rising sun in the east. Communications from Konoha and Kotetsu had arrived just before the nap, merely a text message saying "Staying in touch regularly. No progress, still searching." Haruaki wanted to receive a call saying that Kirika had been found. Not yet? Hurry.

Haruaki clutched his cellphone tightly and decided to go to the living room first. Passing through the corridor, just as he was about to reach the living room, he suddenly saw something light up inside the room. Surprised, he looked into the living room.

"What... It's you, Kuroe?"

Kuroe was standing inside spacing out with a blank expression. After blinking, she said:

"Woah, Haru, you really scared me there."

"It's because you were spacing out, right? What are you doing?"

As soon as he asked, Kuroe suddenly looked down at her body then said as if something abruptly occurred to her:

"Oh right! I knew I'd leveled up... Thanks to the special training, I've finally finished my new move! Oh my, I never thought I'd succeed! This is really amazing!"

"Oh~ Sure sure, amazing amazing."

What, just the same as usual? Haruaki responded half-heartedly. Now that she mentioned it, the brightness just now did resemble the momentary glow produced when injecting healing powers into hair. Kuroe had apparently focused on doing special training recently to develop new moves and today's was just another session of special training... Taking a closer look, Haruaki found her collar a bit crumpled and crooked. He really wondered how seriously she was doing her training.

"Muu~ You won't believe me~" Leaving behind the slightly dissatisfied Kuroe, Haruaki walked to the kitchen to boil water. During this time, he thought over many things. About Kirika, about Konoha, about Honatsu, about Kuroe just now. Kuroe was doing weird things as usual for this was her special way of acting considerate, to prevent the mood from getting too heavy, right? Thinking that, Haruaki decided he really needed to prepare her a good cup of tea.

Returning to the living room, Haruaki placed his cellphone on the table as though enshrining a divine statue so that it was within arm's reach anytime. While drinking tea, all he could do was wait. In order not to disturb Fear during her nap, he turned down the volume after switching on the television. Regional news. Any phantom slasher incidents? No.

While he was dallying in this manner, the sun rose. It was almost time for Fear to rise from bed.

Any time was fine. Preparations were already in place. Konoha, Kotetsu, still not yet? No news yet—

Then—

"...!"

The instant the cellphone ringtone's first note was heard, Haruaki picked up the call.

"Hello!"

'Hi~ Hello~?'

Haruaki felt his vision suddenly go black. Due to his panic, he did not have time to check the screen—The caller was not Konoha but someone whose importance was less than a billionth, someone who only added to his impatience.

The father who had gone missing since last night, claiming he had things to do.

'I already heard from Gab-chan, it seems like quite a crisis.'

"If you know that... Please don't call. I'm very busy."

Due to call waiting, Haruaki did not have to worry about missing Konoha's calls even while he was talking to Honatsu like this. However, he was in no mood to be chatting with his father.

'Yes yes, I will go look for Kirika-chan next, but I just wanted to talk to you first. I know many people in this town so I plan on asking my acquaintances for leads first.'

This was—probably a good thing. Given the current circumstances, of course it would be better to have an additional person helping. Kirika must absolutely be rescued. However, Haruaki could not bring himself to say thanks honestly.

At this moment, Honatsu suddenly changed the subject.

'Oh right—How's the present? Did you use it?'

For an instant, Haruaki did not understand what he was talking about. After a moment's delay did he realize suddenly with instant rage that Honatsu was referring to yesterday's birthday present. What the heck was he talking about at this kind of time!?

"Where would I find the time for that!? I haven't even opened it!"

'...Oh, I see...'

Honatsu's response sounded neither disappointed, nor angry, nor confused. For some reason—His voice become very calm and solemn, to an unbelievable degree.

'I would best advise you to open it. Or rather... Now might be the best time to open the present. Perhaps you ought to look inside then contemplate.'

"Wha...?"

'—Open the present and look at what's inside, Haruaki. I left a note, didn't I? How to use that present is entirely up to you.'

Honatsu's tone of voice was not forceful, even giving a gentle impression. However, there was a certain commanding sense of realness to it, like when a sage declared the truth, absolute certainty.

As though waiting for his words to permeate Haruaki's heart, Honatsu remained silent for a while.

Then his breath suddenly became gentle and he said:

'I will find a suitable time to return. Goodbye now.'

"Ah..."

Before Haruaki could say anything, the call came to an end unilaterally. Unilaterally. Always like that. Haruaki disliked this too.

"...What the heck..."

"Haru?"

"Nothing, it was Pops calling."

Haruaki briefly replied to Kuroe who had her head cocked in puzzlement, then closed up his cellphone.

However, he still felt unpleasant in his heart and he knew the reason.

(Damn it... Always saying incomprehensible things with hidden meanings...)

Haruaki only hesitated for a few seconds.

Then he left Kuroe behind and walked out of the living room to return to his own room. Where did he put it? Right, he remembered it had stayed on his desk.

Walking over to his desk, he saw that the box was definitely there. Still pushed to a corner with the feelings from Haruaki's refusal to accept it.

"Seriously... What the heck is it?"

Biting his lip again, Haruaki untied the ribbon roughly before tearing open the wrapping paper. Then he picked up the box's lid—and gasped.

"No way... right...?"

At this moment, he heard a thud behind him.

Haruaki looked back to see Fear standing there, apparently just woken up.

"Haruaki, over... there..."

With a face of shock, she was staring near his hands.

In other words, contained inside the birthday present's box—

Indulgence Disks, more than ten of them.

Part 6

Absolutely baffling, why did Honatsu have these in his possession? However, they were authentic, no doubt about it.

Inside Haruaki's room, Fear was staring intently at the Indulgence Disks laid out in a row on the tatami floor.

"Damn it... He's not picking up, that bastard Pops..."

Haruaki frowned with the cellphone pressed to his ear but it was ringing in vain. Fear glanced at him before facing the Indulgence Disks again.

What she had always wanted. What she sought. What she wanted to gather. What she needed in order to keep her darkness under control.

That kind of thing was currently placed before her eyes—But inexplicably...

What surfaced in her heart was a feeling that even she found unbelievable.

It was confusion. It could also be considered a struggle.

"Fear... What do we do...?"

"First... Wait..."

"Of course I'll wait because I know that is what you always wanted. Don't worry, just do what you want to do. I'll help you."

"Yeah, this is what I've always wanted. After counting them, I think there are enough here to seal away almost all of my remaining mechanisms, probably leaving only one or two. But—"

Fear tightly gripped her fist that was resting on the tatami floor.

Looking up at Haruaki, she said:

"But! If I install these Indulgence Disks *right now*—I'll be left almost powerless when I really want to take part in battle to rescue Kirika. In other words, I'll become almost unable to fight! If I fail to rescue Kirika because of that...!"

"Ah..."

Haruaki's gaze wavered but he instantly relaxed his expression.

"Then let's wait until after Class Rep is rescued, okay?"

She was thinking Haruaki would say that. However, that was wrong. It did not solve the fundamental problem.

Fear shook her head. The silver color shook in the corner of the eye.

"There is no conclusive... evidence..."

"Huh?"

"There is no conclusive evidence able to prove... that this kind of incident won't happen again."

Fear slowly inhaled then said:

"I can't help but think, suppose I rescued Kirika then installed the Indulgence Disks. Then suppose further that almost all of my mechanisms were sealed away. What if something similar happened in the future? Next time, you might ended up abducted or it could be Kuroe! Once installed, Indulgence Disks cannot be taken out again. I have no way of recovering my power! If that really caused something irrevocable to happen—I'll surely be unable to forgive myself!"

Simply imagining it made her heart beat fast. Her tone of voice suddenly became forceful.

"Hey Haruaki, I—I really...!"

But in spite of that...

She still could only whisper the question.

Because she felt that these were very important words that were as fragile as soap bubbles.

"Is it really okay... to lose the power to fight...?"

To this date, she had thought over this countless times. Each and every time, the conclusion she reached was definitely this.

However—Right now, the solution was placed so concretely in front of her in tangible form. Carrying a totally different sense of weight, carrying cruelty that threatened to swallow her into oblivion, it had turned into an extremely pressing problem, weighing on her unprecedentedly.

How odd, she thought in honesty to herself.

This was clearly something she had desired all this time. All along, she thought that just by acquiring them would bring her happiness. Why—

"Anyway, let's keep them temporarily in reserve... Can't we do that...?"

Feeling a thud on her head, Fear knew without looking.

It was the sensation of Haruaki's hand.

She was crouching in front of the Indulgence Disks with her face lowered. Haruaki had walked over to her side. Placing his hand on her head, he had sat down lightly on the spot. Facing the opposite direction, he was positioning himself so that their right shoulders were touching.

"...I don't even know if it's possible to keep them temporarily in reserve."

"You have a point. Not everything can be kept in reserve temporarily... It's the same for me..."

Haruaki spoke as though recalling something.

Because a feeling resembling shyness, reluctance and pain would surge up if she were to look at his face—

Fear remained sitting, moving her body restlessly, allowing her back to bump into Haruaki. Haruaki also turned himself—naturally, it now became the two of them leaning against each other's back.

Currently, she believed this was fine. From their mutually touching backs, from their mutually supporting backs, she felt his body warmth.

"There are too many things to think about... Totally... impossible to clear my thoughts."

"Yeah..."

Fear looked up at the ceiling and exhaled lazily. She felt Haruaki's hair against the side of her ears. Surely, Haruaki must be feeling the same way as her, she thought.

Although they knew clearly in their hearts that the present could not persist forever like this...

However—if only time could flow a little slower.

Stemming from multiple reasons, Fear thought that to herself.

Part 7

She had always been a thing, so it was only natural.

Right now, she was also a thing. Henceforth, it would probably remain the same.

Painful. However, that pain now felt a bit distant. Feeling detached, Kirika stared at the meatbag known as herself rupture while red liquid gushed out.

The enemy kicked her then used the motion to pull out the spear at the same time. Kirika felt neither relief nor anger at this, simply thinking: pulled out, I see. After all, it was going to enter her body again after some time. Reluctance towards parting ways would be pointless.

"...How boring and killing the mood. It is only appropriate that something cursed by an ugly Wathe should beg for mercy in an ugly manner."

Kirika looked up at the expressionless helmet and spoke again after truly a long time since that the last. That said, not speaking would be fine too.

"Sorry... for not meeting your expectations..."

"Is sarcasm all you're capable of? No lowly screams? No mockable unsightliness?"

No. If the great knight before her wished for it, then it was definitely not going to happen. Since this answer was truly unnecessary to speak aloud, Kirika remained silent. Sleif clicked her tongue lightly.

"—Fully cursed existences should meeting their end in a fitting manner. Dying with unfettered despair and enlightenment is not a fate that a cursed sinner can choose."

Muttering that, Sleif oriented her helmet towards the ground as though thinking. But soon after—

"...Just a bit more. No matter, then I shall tell you."

Hearing that, Kirika could not help but ask. Amidst her vision that was dimmed by anemia, Kirika looked up desperately, staring back at Sleif's helmet.

"Tell me... what...?"

"Namely, *why I am doing this and for what purpose your blood is being used.*"

Then Sleif brought her lips to Kirika's ear.

Quietly—She released the answer—

"Ahhh, ahhh, ahhhhhhhh...!"

Starting from the instant when Kirika understood the meaning of her words...

Kirika kept trembling nonstop. Her entire body's temperature seemed to drop all at once. So cold. So dark. So frightening. Indeed, frightening—too frightening!

Staring wide-eyed, with breathing quickened, she looked at Sleif, who seemed slightly satisfied.

"Yes, this is the right gaze."

"You, you... You guys...!"

"Despair, for that is what suits the contemptible likes of your kind. Cry in ugliness, for that is what suits the contemptible likes of your kind. Beg for mercy, for that is what suits the contemptible likes of your kind—

"Oooh, ahhhhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

With complete disregard for everything, Kirika struggled with her bound arms and legs, trying to smash her body towards Sleif and rip her throat apart with her teeth. However, the instant she straightened her back—

"Gah...!"

The spear stabbed into her heart once more. Earlier than expected, the cold blade returned.

"However—Anger is an exception. It only suits those whose happiness has been lost to curses."

Fresh blood gushed out of her mouth again. That did not matter. Too frightening. What Sleif planned to do was hopelessly and incomparably terrifying, even to the point that "absolutely ridiculous" could not be uttered aloud—

With pain and terror interwoven together, her consciousness was almost ripped to shreds. However, Kirika still cried out hoarsely as hard as she could.

"Uwa, ahhh! Kill me now! Kill... me now—!"

"Oh?"

"I beg you...! Rather than forced... to partake in that, I'd rather die...! I-I absolutely don't want that... to happen because of me...!"

"Even if you died, it will simply continue as before, using other people as substitutes. Asking me to increase the number of victims, as expected of a depraved woman even lower than animals."

Sleif remarked as though watching a good show:

"An ugly struggle on the verge of death, truly contemptible. Go ahead. Curse yourself and scream in despair while I use you until the last moment. Now that would be your proper end."

"...Ahhhhhhh...!"

More than ever before, Kirika loathed this body of hers that could not die even if she wanted to.

If it were possible for her to end everything by biting her own tongue in an act of suicide...

Surely that would be such an attractive solution.

Part 8

By the time Haruaki realized, steady breathing noises could be heard coming from behind him. For Fear, the earlier napping time must have been merely for appearances' sake.

Hearing her breathing, feeling the presence of the Indulgence Disks on the tatami floor, cursing the silent cellphone—Haruaki pondered many things, letting time

slip by. Kuroe visited to check on their situation at one point, but seeing Fear sleeping soundly with her back against Haruaki's back, she left straight away with a smile.

The sun was already up. It was very bright outside the window. Normally, I'd already left for school by this time—Haruaki thought.

School. The usual scene. The scene with everyone present. Fear, Konoha, Taizou, Kana... and Kirika.

He turned his head and looked at the desk. On there was the brand-new apron Kirika had given him as a birthday present. What were her feelings when bringing the present over? Having made the deal with Pakuaki already, she had already decided to take action? What exactly was it that spurred her to go so far as to obtain it—

(I already know what it is... I am so despicable...)

Staring at that apron, he felt something similar to pain surging from the depths of his chest. Something in the center of his body seemed to be vibrating. The magnitude of the shaking became larger and larger, larger and larger.

He thought of Fear. Indulgence Disks. Powerlessness. Becoming powerless. The pros and cons of keeping in reserve temporarily.

He thought of Konoha. The feeling of being left behind. A change unlike others in the past. Gradually changing aspects as well as the relationship between him and her. Her inquiring gaze after accepting this fact.

Oscillating forwards and backwards, left and right, shaking the depths of his body, it said to him:

Take action.

"..."

Haruaki turned his body lightly, moving his back away to let the sleeping Fear lie down on the tatami floor. After looking at her sleeping face for a few seconds, he stood up but just as he was about to start walking—

"Where... are you going?"

Originally sleeping, Fear reached out and grabbed his arm.

She had gotten up on her knees, hugging his arm, she embraced it tightly against her bosom.

"In the end... I can't bear this."

"Cow Tits will be mad."

"Yeah... But even if Konoha were to cut ties with me, it's possible there's nothing I can do about that. Even so—Right now, I must take action. Otherwise..."

He swallowed and continued:

"Just like what you just said, I... won't be able to forgive myself...!"

However, Fear did not loosen her hold of his arm. Looking down, her silver-haired head seemed to be trembling slightly.

"Despite what I said yesterday... To be honest, I really agree with what Cow Tits said about not letting you out of the house. It wasn't because I had no choice but to accept her opinion—It was because I agree wholeheartedly, to the point that even if she hadn't said it, I'd have been the one to propose it."

"Fear..."

The silver hair suddenly fluttered and Fear looked up at him.

"I have no proof! But... there's an ominous feeling. This time, somehow it's different from usual. Like something huge is gonna happen. It feels like a single misstep would lead to irrevocable things..."

"But I want to find a solution before irrevocable things happened. And even if I left the house, it doesn't mean something will happen for certain."

"The issue isn't whether something will happen or not! It's that it would be too late once it happened!"

"But Class Rep has already been captured!"

He stared into Fear's serious eyes. He knew this was a parallel discussion with no consensus. She was worried about him from the bottom of her heart whereas he wanted to leave the house, driven by his own feelings and impulse. Taking precautions against unsubstantiated risk versus self-satisfaction without assured benefit, which side was correct? No idea. But even if the two of them kept staring intently into each other's eyes, they still would not know the answer.

"So... what should be done...?"

The reply to this whisper came from a completely unexpected location.

Haruaki and Fear suddenly sensed a presence, so they looked at the door—

"Just act according to your feelings, doesn't that work~?"

Smiling, it was "her"—Yachi Honatsu.

Neither sarcastic nor confused, he offered this suggestion with calm composure.

Honatsu had returned without them knowing. Looking around as though in wonderment, he entered Haruaki's room. Back when he placed the birthday present, he probably entered without asking as well.

"That's right, just act according to your feelings. It's not a bad thing to be ruled by your emotions."

Honatsu was speaking with perfect confidence and composure in expression and attitude while sitting down nimbly on Haruaki's desk instead of a chair. What an ill-mannered father.

At this moment, Fear regained her senses and stood up. Pointing at the Indulgence Disks on the tatami floor, she said:

"Honatsu! You finally came back. I demand an explanation from you about these!"

"These are Indulgence Disks. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do. How did you get so many?"

"You're asking how did I get so many? ...I can only answer this way: I worked very hard to collect them. I really spent tons and tons of effort~"

Seeing his father speak in such a carefree manner, Haruaki reached the end of his patience and cried out, almost in a roar:

"Pops!"

Fear jumped in fright but Honatsu simply showed a faint smile.

"What's the matter~?"

"Enough, okay? Just tell us... the whole truth. You didn't keep your promise earlier to explain everything at the superintendent's place, so now it's time for you to tell us!"

"...That was my intention in returning home. My, how distrusted I am~"

Honatsu pouted and sighed. Duh, he had no credibility remaining to speak of.

"My answer just now was not meant to gloss over things. Regarding how I obtained the Indulgence Disks... Really, all I can say is that I worked hard to gather them, expending monumental effort. Like sniffing for leads and sneaking into the Knights Dominion's vault to obtain them. Or secretly borrowing a tool

installed with an Indulgence Disk while a knight was napping. It was essentially like that for most cases although there were times when I jumped through hoops and hurdles, only to find out that the Disk was actually held by someone else in a different organization. There were also instances when I bought them through black market information brokers and underground auctions."

Suddenly, Haruaki recalled what the supplier he met at Kyoto had said. 'Especially when these things have become even harder to come by in recent times'—Why was that?

Was it because someone else was gathering Indulgence Disks from all over the world?

"Could it be that... after sending me here, you haven't been back because..."

"Yes, because I've been all over the world to gather Indulgence Disks, although that's not the only reason. After all, I was the one who found you and sent you to this home, so I definitely need to do well on the after-sales service."

"No way..."

Haruaki had always been thinking, where on earth was he all this time and doing what. After sending Fear here, his father had spent even longer periods away from home. So during this stretch of time—He had been searching continually? From day one, his goal was gathering Indulgence Disks?

"B-But... I really find it unbelievable. You were targeting the Knights Dominion and even if there were others, that would include the Lab Chief's Nation, the Draconians, the Bivorio Family... and many others."

"Recently, new organizations have risen up, such as the Friedrich Commercial Alliance or the Reminders, etc. Although they're still small in scale, who knows how much they'll develop in the future."

"I haven't heard of them, but anyway, no matter which organization, so long as they're involved with cursed tools, they should all be quite dangerous. All of them

are impossible to deal with using ordinary logic, right? And you managed to stay safe every time?"

"Ah~ Hmm, because I'm totally bad at fighting, I've always taken action secretly and sneakily. Using a game analogy, my job type would be something like a thief, explorer or tomb raider. If the enemy was a total musclehead and I couldn't find an opening for stealing, I'd give up from the start and wait before trying again. For example... Oh right, like Neto the Avenger."

That guy? Fear frowned with revulsion, although the Indulgence Disk installed in Neto's «The Paingrapher» ultimately ended up inside her.

"Hmm, so basically, you've been running all over the place to plunder Indulgence Disks like a thief... No, even if it was like that, I'm really surprised that you survived in one piece. Wouldn't it be natural if you were discovered on occasion and it turned into a fight?"

"Of course I'd run away as quickly as I could in those cases! Fleeing nonstop, nonstop, nonstop. After all, my goal is not in defeating enemies. Oh, however, if you were to ask if I survived in one piece to the very end... I can only tilt my head and say: 'Not necessarily~'"

Honatsu laughed "ahaha." In contrast, Haruaki felt inexplicable chills along his spine.

Somewhere in his mind, he was starting to realize a certain matter.

However, Honatsu simply continued:

"After I trespassed the Knights Dominion's facilities to steal things again and again, they started to get serious. Oh dear~ I felt like I had really become a world-class wanted criminal with a handsome bounty! Then I started getting pursuers following closely no matter whether I was awake or asleep. Finally, I was surrounded and backed into a corner, what a total crisis! It was so bad at the time that even leaving Europe was a challenge so I couldn't help but worry: 'Ahhh, I might never have a chance to return to this home again~' Sometimes I felt depressed while other times were better—"

"Th-Then what? How did you escape the encirclement—"

Halfway through, Fear stopped talking.

Her eyes stared wide in shock.

At the same time, Haruaki realized as well.

He guessed *that answer*.

Before his eyes—using a face that was not his father's—his father was smiling.

The father, who had returned to this home with a woman's appearance, was currently smiling.

Partially closed, his eyes showed a gentle expression. Recounting facts, his voice was calm.

"From head to foot, holding nothing back at all, mindset and physical appearance included, everything was fundamentally altered... Unless the change was this completely, it would have been truly impossible to escape the encirclement, impossible to return to this home."

"No... way..."

A groan leaked out from Haruaki's mouth. His body lost balance and he stumbled.

He felt dizzy as though the world had turned upside down. Black and white. Inside and outside. He was starting to see things that had remained out of sight until now. What had he been looking at until now?

Breathing became difficult. His heart raced.

However, his father waved his hand nonchalantly and said:

"Take sex change and other plastic surgery techniques for example, advances have been rapid in recent years~ Is this what people call contemporary trends? It

really saved my life~ I also took great pains to make sure my thoughts and behavior were like a woman's—Now that I think about it carefully it's quite similar to Konoha's image change in the past. Since it's become a habit by now, I actually feel uncomfortable not using a woman's tone of voice to speak. You guys may find it repugnant, but I'm really sorry~"

Out of the corner of his eye, Haruaki saw Fear clench her fist tightly. Head lowered, biting her lip, she muttered:

"...Honestly speaking, I've always found it strange."

Taking on Honatsu and Haruaki's gazes with her silver hair, Fear continued:

"About the enemies starting from day one—ever since that Peavey woman from the Knights Dominion came. For an organization that greatly wants to destroy me, their actions after that... seem way too scattered, right? Although after that, there was the knight who was Aiko's owner while Neto and Lilyhowell also made appearances, the numbers are still far too small. Plus the fact that Neto and Lilyhowell's target wasn't me, so one could say that there was only Aiko's owner alone. That's why I've always been worrying. Why is the Knights Dominion leaving me alone? Since they want to destroy me so much, why haven't they sent more knights again and again?"

"Hmmhmm, but it's nice that things have been fairly peaceful the whole time."

"Now I finally understand the reason. It must be because the Knights Dominion didn't even have the leisure to think of me. Because they were out in full force, trying to hunt down an even trickier target that they must punish with their pride at stake...!"

Fear slowly looked up and stared at Honatsu's face head on.

Honatsu smiled.

With a quiet voice under gritted teeth, Fear then said:

"You too—have been fighting. Constantly till now, you were alone."

"It's not as cool as you make it out to be, I'm just doing what I ought to do."

Of course, these words reached Haruaki's ears as well.

Yes, indeed. His father had been absent from home. So, where was he? All over the world. Due to certain reasons, due to certain extenuating circumstances, he was rushing about, all over the world—And here, Haruaki's thoughts halted.

All this time, he had believed that no amount of thinking would allow him to comprehend.

He had also believed that it was enough to know that his father had been touring the world, after all, it did not make much of a difference.

He was totally mistaken. His father had been searching for Indulgence Disks nonstop, risking his life to gather them, constantly evading pursuers from vengeful organizations. This—Wasn't this the fighting that Fear mentioned?

Did this not count as risking one's life in a persistent and solitary battle?

"Why!? Why did you go so far... Pops...?"

Haruaki took a step forward to question him and Honatsu laughed "hoho."

"Didn't I just say so? This is after-sales service. Back in that castle's secret storeroom, I asked Fear: 'Do you want to lift your curse?' I sent her to this home because she answered YES. Well then, in order to achieve her goal, I have to help her as much as possible. During this period while she's lifting her curse, how could I miss out if there were tools for restraining her power~?"

This seemed to constitute an answer, or maybe it did not. The task was definitely not absolutely mandatory. What was his reason for going so far as to risk his own life? Why did he do this—?

Wasn't it obvious? Haruaki clenched his fist tightly, lowered his face and came to an instant revelation.

It was for them.

For Fear whose curse threatened to devour her and for the idiot son named Yachi Haruaki who was closest to her. For the two of them to live a carefree life, passing each day safely while lifting the curse—

"You're... such an idiot..."

"Hmm?"

"Why did you go so far... even sacrificing your own body... Pops..."

Haruaki was facing forward as though staring as hard as he could. Unless he did that, he would not be able to look into his father's face directly.

Even so, Honatsu's expression was still very gentle. Sitting on the desk, he was swaying his legs.

"Because I felt... If I did that, things would have better 'developments.'"

"Muu, what do you mean by that?"

Fear lightly tilted her face and asked.

"Oh dear, I haven't mentioned this? I... have a power that's similar to catching faint~ faint glimpses of 'developments.' Like this, a feeling with fuzzy images."

"Wha? I'm hearing this for the first time."

"I don't know either. What does it mean?"

Haruaki and Fear both cast an inquiring gaze. Honatsu scratched his cheek and said:

"This can only be described as 'developments.' Basically, I can predict that doing 'this' seems better or things would be bad if 'this' continued~ Something like that."

"...Does it count as a kind of fortune telling?"

"Feels a bit like it, but not too similar. Because it also allows me to know vaguely that someone probably has a cursed power... Hmm, I guess I should say that I'm particularly sensitive to the concept of 'developments'? Bluntly stated, perhaps it's just a strong sixth sense, or perhaps it's just wrong intuition that happens to develop in a good direction."

After taking a breath, he continued:

"Anyway—that's how I've been living my life, following that intuition. Like sensing the 'developments' of an ancient curse in an abandoned castle's underground section. Then going through a secret door to have a look, I found a strange cube inside."

Honatsu turned to Fear and winked. However, this action was still as repulsive as ever.

"Then... I mentioned 'developments,' didn't I? So I judged that simply sending the cube to this home was not enough. If I could collect the Indulgence Disks, I'd be able to bring happiness to everyone, so I went ahead to gather them. That's all."

Honatsu spoke with a smile as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

Although Haruaki did not know the details, seeing as Honatsu claimed that he had survived till now by following this power to see "developments," it must be true. That was why he could work as a jack-of-all-trades in the field of cursed tools. Despite the superintendent's constant failures, Honatsu was still able to bring home cursed tools every time. Furthermore, he was able to find Konoha, Kuroe and Fear, bringing them back to this home.

(I see... So that's the truth...)

Many many things now made sense. Haruaki had always found his father's behavior incomprehensible and inexplicable, but for the very first time, he was able to catch a glimpse of the underlying logic and reasons.

Haruaki felt a sudden gurgle and twitching in the depths of his throat as though having some kind of fit, but he desperately suppressed it.

Fear was looking at him with worried yet relieved eyes.

Honatsu still continued to show a smiling and gentle expression.

"By the way... I think you two can now sympathize with my situation, so back to the main subject, have you decided on the answer just now? Basically, the question of going or not."

"Muu, well—"

Fear glanced sharply at Haruaki. Without any intention to back down, Haruaki looked back at her.

Seeing that, Honatsu laughed again.

"Just like I said earlier, my suggestion is this: It's not a bad thing to be ruled by your emotions. So, Haruaki, go ahead."

"...!"

"I thinking that even better developments will likely come out of this, although I don't know in particular what things will have what kind of developments."

"Hey Honatsu! What are you talking about!? Speaking so relaxed! You clearly have no idea what's going to happen!"

Fear took a great stride towards Honatsu. Tilting his head and going "hmm~", Honatsu suddenly reached out with his right hand—

"Ha!"

"Munyo!"

He caught Fear by the face. Approaching him, Fear kept struggling nonstop. Across the silver-haired head, Haruaki and Honatsu looked into each other's eyes. Honatsu's face crumpled with a wry smile. This was an expression Haruaki had never seen before. It was a little similar to the face from before he had become "her."

"Although it feels dissonant, it's not like I'm unable to speak in my original tone of voice. So just this once, I'll turn back to the way I was. Haruaki."

"...!"

The voice coming from his throat was a woman's, but the tone was a certain person's familiar way of speaking.

"Haruaki... It's fine for you to act more willfully, just like this girl here. Although you need to take on the adult's role in this home... I'm here now. Just say what you want to say and do what you want to do. To me, you and Fear are both children. Just do as you wish."

"Oh..."

For a while, the two of them stared at each other.

In the end, Honatsu turned his gaze away in embarrassment, his cheeks going red.

"Ah~ Mmm~ C-Cough, somehow it feels a bit embarrassing~"

"Normally, you should feel embarrassed when talking like a woman! Anyway, release me now, or I'll curse you!"

"Right now, could you please let us have some father-son time alone?"

Haruaki was experiencing an unbelievable feeling.

There was a hot mass in the depths of his heart seeming as though it would melt, disperse and spread out all over his entire body. With that, his body was going to move in an unprecedented manner. That was fuel. He had been injected with driving power.

Yes, truly... It was unbelievable.

He could not believe that this kind of irresponsible father had given him a push using irresponsible advice.

However—He must admit it.

Currently, he definitely felt as though someone had given his back a push. He felt that he could move forward and that he should move forward.

Hence, take action. Far better than staying in this home, take action.

"Muu... Muunnn~ ...Puha! Ah! Damn you, Haruaki, that's the gaze belonging to someone thinking malicious thoughts, right!? My opinion remains the same, no matter what this guy says, danger is danger! We don't know what will happen next. Cow Tits forbids it and I also—"

Escaping from Honatsu's grasp, Fear approached Haruaki and insisted loudly. However, Haruaki simply thought back to Honatsu's words just now.

(...Do as I wish huh?)

Perhaps. Perhaps he could do as he wished. For example, now that Konoha was no longer like an elder sister, he did not need to act like a younger brother either. Whenever she got angry, he no longer needed to back down and act timid. He could start by not following her directions.

Something akin to defiance surged in his chest.

He decided to go. Thus he would go. This was already unchangeable.

Then what after going out—If leaving the house ends up accomplishing nothing but satisfying himself, it could not be helped either.

Since his father had been fighting hard, he shall fight too. Just like his father, everyone had different ways of fighting. Perhaps there existed a way of fighting that belonged to him alone.

Just as Honatsu's battle was staying on the run after going through a sex change, meanwhile collecting Indulgence Disks on his own...

What was the battle method within Yachi Haruaki's ability?

In order to rescue Kirika, to move forward, what could he do—?

...Then Haruaki reached his conclusion.

The sense of defiance surging after hearing his father's words had guided him to the answer. Purely by following the simple direction of "do as you wish," the solution to the equation was unexpectedly found near him. In order to save her, what must be done.

(...Haha.)

At the same time, that simple sense of defiance also allowed him to find the answer to the problem that had been troubling him until now. After casting off all restraints, keeping a stance of neutrality and re-examining his own heart without being fettered by anything—In the end, he realized that there was only one sentence he needed to tell her.

The way to rescue her, and what needed to be done after saving her...

Having found the answers, all that remained was the execution.

Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps this was not correct. However, this was undoubtedly—

The most like his own style.

Haruaki grinned. Looking at Fear who was glaring at him with a frown, he said:

"Fear, since you said that something might happen, then all we need to do is prevent that something from happening, right?"

"What?"

Then Haruaki turned his gaze.

For the first time in a long while—really in a very long while—he looked at his father and tried to say something willful.

"Pops, you've got many connections in the business, right? I need a favor from you."

Part 9

Evening, at a beach.

Haruaki appeared at the same location as the day before yesterday's, accompanied by Fear, Kuroe and Honatsu. After waiting for a while, the members of the first awaited group strode their way to arrive. This was Konoha with a face of displeasure along with Kotetsu.

"Haruaki-kun! I clearly emphasized over and over again, asking you not to leave the house!"

"Sorry, Konoha. But... it's because I can't stay as your younger brother forever."

Due to calling her and one-sidedly telling her to come here, Haruaki expected her to be in a rage. Since he did not want to waste time slowly explaining, he gazed straight into her eyes and spoke his true feelings candidly.

"So, I decided on my own to defy your orders as an equal."

"...!"

Konoha wanted to say something reflexively, but in order to calm herself, she slowly closed her eyes and took a deep breath—

"As equals... huh...?"

"Yes."

She opened her eyes. Beneath those glasses, her eyes quietly inquired of him.

"From now on, all the time?"

Haruaki nodded and thought to himself: She needs proof, right? He needed to prove he was serious.

"Back when we entered high school together, we promised. Although the promise was sloppily broken later, I've decided to abide by that promise seriously from now on. I swear—I *won't call you 'Kono-nee' ever again.*"

"..."

Konoha sighed long and hard. Then—

As though in exasperation, she smiled helplessly.

"Sigh~ ...Is this actually good news? Or bad news? It seems to be exactly what I wanted yet it seems like there's no rush to change things immediately... Hmm, very well. I'll relent this time."

"Thank you, Konoha."

"But you do have a clear plan, I hope? That said, I have no right to say anything given our fruitless efforts."

"Truth be told, it is as she says. Summoning us here with a just a call saying 'I came up with a plan' yet leaving us in the dark. Why did we return to this place?"

Kotetsu glared at Haruaki viciously while he spoke. Fear closed her eyes in exhaustion and answered:

"He'll probably explain on the way, but I don't know whether or not you'll accept it."

"Hmm~ On the other hand, we've already give up resisting."

"...Why am I getting a sense of foreboding about this...?"

At this moment, the sounds of an engine could be heard. The second awaited group had appeared on the sea in a private speed boat.

"Thanks for waiting, everyone."

"Ahhh... Suffering this rocking is so demotivating~"

"My apologies, it took a while of preparation because this boat has not been started for a long time. Come aboard!"

Riding the cabin cruiser was the superintendent in his gas mask, Zenon who was in charge of operating the boat, as well as Ganon who was grabbing onto the boat's edge, collapsed in a heap. Rather than the cabin cruiser's rocking, the true cause was more likely the can of beer in her hand.

Everyone walked into the sea and got on the cabin cruiser, wetting their feet in the process. Soon they departed.

The cabin cruiser's deck was quite spacious and the breeze felt very comfortable. Haruaki faced the cabin cruiser's destination while glancing at Honatsu beside him and asked a question that had been bothering him.

"By the way, why were you keeping a low profile last time?"

"Low profile?"

"Basically, back when Pendragon's group visited the villa, weren't you particularly quiet?"

"Oh dear~ It was purely due to fear. Because I helped out quite a lot when Gab-chan left the Draconians, so I was worried whether they'd bear a grudge against me."

"Hey... Is that issue really okay?"

"When I called them, they agreed readily without giving an impression like: 'You bastard—! I won't forgive you, I'm gonna kill you!' So I think I was probably overthinking things. What a happy miscalculation."

"What miscalculation... Aren't you capable of predicting developments?"

"Of course there are times when it's impossible to predict. Because it's more like a fuzzy sixth sense."

"...Hurray~"

"What's the matter? Konoha, why did you suddenly yell hurray with an empty smile?"

Surprised by Konoha's strange behavior next to him, Haruaki inquired. Konoha narrowed her eyes and said:

"Two reasons. One of them being the pleasure of seeing you and Honatsu-san talking normally after how you've been keeping your distance, Haruaki-kun, hence, hurray~"

"N-Not at all... It was normal before, right? So what's the other reason?"

Konoha exhaled greatly and grabbed the edge of the boat powerlessly like Ganon just now.

"After hearing the conversation between you, I think I know where we're headed. Seeing my sense of foreboding come true, I can only raise my arms and surrender, hence, hurray~"

Keeping the same posture, Konoha only looked up and stared at the cabin cruiser's destination ahead, waiting for them. Haruaki also lifted his gaze to look. But frankly speaking, even without looking intentionally, that thing had been in view all along.

In other words, the giant fleet still moored on the sea—Dragon Island, the Draconians' stronghold.

Countless ships were facing them, waiting confidently for this cabin cruiser to gradually approach.

That ship was wide and massive.

The deck was almost a flat plain. Very spacious. Spacious to a frightening degree. With no obstacles in view, the floor underfoot was laid with wooden boards that squeaked pleasantly. But upon closer examination, one could see that it was a mixture of brand-new wood and heavily scarred planks. There were also marks resembling water stains—even dark red ones.

A brown deck as well as a pure blue space formed from the sea and the sky.

Standing out conspicuously in the very center was a white, round table with chairs surrounding it. The table was quite large, hence the number of chairs were many. On one of the chairs—

"Welcome to the Dueling Ship Leviathan. Please pick any seat you like. Don't worry, there's no mechanism like the type where the deck would suddenly open up to make people fall down along with their chair. Haha~"

"What's that? But that kind of mechanism sounds fun, let's make one next time. Every time you sexually harass someone, I'll pull a cord to make you fall with a whoosh~!"

"Simply imagining it is punishment bringing such joy/heartbreak that my uterus hurts."

Pendragon had his legs crossed with feet on the table, Riko was sitting on his thigh while Granaury was standing behind Pendragon with her eyes closed as usual.

"Hmm~ What naming sense that resonates deeply with my heart. In this day and age, its totally unostentatious plainness ends up being awesome. By the way, what's a dueling ship?"

Kuroe cocked her tiny head and asked.

"Just as everyone can see, this is a ship serving as a battle arena. Consider a facility that comes with the Dragon Island. Spacious and flat, facilitating movement, it allows participants to fully show their power. That said, there might be stains everywhere, yeah, but don't mind them."

"Hmph, so these stains are blood after all...? What a terrifying place."

"I picked this out of consideration for you guys, you know? I could have took you guys to the super cramped meeting room at the back of the ship, but then you'd worry about traps, right? Or worry about getting imprisoned, then what'll I do? But there's no better visibility than here and no one can do anything, so relax!"

"Allow me to say out of courtesy: thank you for your unnecessary consideration."

"Anyway, sit down first, everyone. Getting all tense and wary now is already too late."

Hearing the superintendent say that, Haruaki sat down on one of the chairs in trepidation. Fear sat herself down hard on the seat next to him whereas Konoha nervously sat on his other side. Kotetsu and Kuroe also found seats casually while Zenon and Ganon stood behind the superintendent without sitting down.

"Oh right, you're Yachi Honatsu, aren't you? I totally didn't notice until now."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry, it's because you didn't ask~"

"Ha! I told you not to worry. I should have mentioned on the phone that I don't bear any grudges about you helping Gabriel to escape. But had you been dealing with Old Man Long, I wouldn't make any promises."

"Then that's truly fortunate~ Please continue to show mercy~"

Honatsu smiled cheerfully and sat down on a chair, tossing her fluffy hair lightly and crossing her long and slender legs—"Mmm~" Pendragon leaned forward slightly.

"By the way... Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I heard you were a man..."

"Yes, because many things happened, I'm totally a girl now."

What girl!? Haruaki groaned in his heart while listening to more unbelievable dialogue.

"I see... You're a woman now eh? Sounds about right. Isn't that great? Since you have a son, then that gives you the MILF attribute, no matter what kind of past you have, it poses no inconvenience to me—"

"Granaury, I want a big hole—! We absolutely need a mechanism for opening up a hole under this guy's feet—!"

With the other side noisy as ever, Haruaki's group were in no mood for joking at all. With tense minds, they could only wait for time to pass.

Then several minutes later—

"Hi hi, thank you for your patience. It took even longer than expected because we don't have a lab on the sea, after all. Perhaps taking this opportunity, should we construct an aquatic lab or not?"

Fear and the others' shoulders shook as they looked at the new arrival—in other words, *the last person expected to join the meeting*, Yamimagari Pakuaki. His tone of voice was flippant as usual while he walked over without any eagerness, the hem of his black lab coat swaying, and took a seat in an empty chair. Naturally, a dark-skinned girl followed behind him. With her characteristically blank expression, she nodded lightly to greet them.

After sitting down, Pakuaki looked towards one side with a smile.

"Hi, nice to meet you, Maximilian Pendragon. I am Yamimagari Pakuaki, just an insignificant researcher. Pleased to make your acquaintance from now on."

"...Yeah, I'll memorize your face."

Pendragon replied after glancing at Pakuaki. "Feels like such a pretentious fellow!" Sitting on Pendragon's thigh, Riko glared at Pakuaki intently. Pakuaki shrugged.

"What a cold reception. I was thinking I'd get a bigger reaction on the first encounter."

"Although I'm slightly interested, at least I've never heard rumors that you're strong, so I'm not that enthusiastic. Instead, rather than you—"

Pendragon moved his fingers that were clasped together on his belly. Instantly—

"Woah!"

A glinting knife stopped in front of Pakuaki. However, the knife was not attacking him but the opposite. From behind Pakuaki, Un Izoey had extended her dark-skinned leg over his shoulder to thrust out the knife held between her toes. She had drawn her knife from under her skirt in order to shield him.

Pakuaki only exclaimed once before settling back in his usually carefree attitude. With his face reflecting off the metal blade of the knife between Un Izoey's toes, he said:

"Hmm, this feels like a wholly innovative way of shaving. The beautiful lines of your leg is totally dominating my view, what a true feast for the eyes."

"Really? My reaction: I already know that I can demand compensation from you when you make this kind of comment, I report this kind of report. Branch Chief Shinohogi told me."

Un Izoey spoke while keeping her gaze firmly on Pendragon. Her narrowed eyes were very sharp. She had probably sensed something from his tiny movement just now. For example, it was as though she had sensed killing intent that only an elite warrior could detect.

At this moment, Pendragon grinned for the first time and scratched his head deliberately. Un Izoey's tension instantly eased as she slowly withdrew her leg back behind Pakuaki's shoulder.

"Just as rumored, you keep a great dog."

"This is a high-class dog with a strong thirst for knowledge, so I can't possibly let you have her."

Next, Pakuaki turned his gaze to Haruaki's group. More accurately, he was looking at Honatsu.

"Hi, Yachi Honatsu-san, hello again, it's been a while. I think we've met two or three times before—Ehhhh!?! When did you become a woman!?! What on earth happened!?"

"Pakuaki, don't bother with the crappy acting~ It's very infuriating. After all, you know everything about me already, right?"

"Haha, how harsh."

Haruaki looked at his father in exasperation and muttered:

"You know each other?"

"Not really friends, but basically at some excavation sites in the past, I competed with his research teams several times to steal cursed tools and the like. How nice it'd be if they could stop those inhumane human experiments and do more research to benefit mankind~"

Seeing the topic of conversation go on a tangent, Pendragon clapped his hands.

"Well then, all the expected parties have arrived. And what a bunch that isn't supposed to gather in one place too. Can we start?"

"Yes, continued chatting isn't the answer."

The superintendent nodded as well, thus the tension at the scene instantly heightened.

"We are only gathered here today by the summons of the famous jack-of-all-trades—rumored to appear anywhere there are Wathes, no matter where, meddling in all business, no matter what—namely, Yachi Honatsu. But in fact, we have not received any notice regarding what this meeting will discuss, isn't that right?"

"Truly an unknown."

"So, what is your goal? You can be candid now, right? I hope this isn't anything inane, host of this gathering—Yachi Haruaki."

The two organization leaders, Pendragon and Pakuaki, both looked at Haruaki at the same time.

The pressure was truly extraordinary. However, Haruaki did not falter for he had resolved himself already.

"First of all, Pendragon—I have a question for you."

"Oh? Please ask."

Just as with his conversation with Konoha earlier, Haruaki had already resolved himself and decided what needed to be said. Hence, an there was no need for pointless preamble. Simply pouring sincerity into his eyes, Haruaki voiced his idea directly on the spot.



"You guys are very obsessed with 'strength,' right? But I want to ask you... Does strength increase the deeper the curse? Or will lifting a curse lead to greater strength?"

Haruaki could feel Fear, Konoha, Kuroe and Kotetsu's gazes.

"Pendragon, what do you think? After looking at those of us present, what are your thoughts?"

He—the Commander of the Draconians—parted his lips in a grin.

Then he answered briefly:

"It depends."

Really? Haruaki silently exhaled. Just as he predicted. Just as he hoped.

"So, in other words, you admit the possibility that 'lifting one's curse can lead to greater strength.'"

Haruaki knew from a while ago. Sending Hiwatari Yume over with the idea that "it might be possible to get stronger by observing Fear's strength up close," Pendragon was different from the other Draconians who took action based on a simple and foolishly straightforward principle of fighting, fighting and more fighting to become strong. Only after reaching the pinnacle of this path did he realize that there existed things that could not be obtained through such means. Hence, to become stronger, he had the flexibility and willingness to explore other directions—

Still staring straight into Pendragon's eyes, Haruaki then said:

"That means... There should exist common ground for us to join forces, right?"

Konoha was sighing silently, shaking her head repeatedly with a look of resignation. Kotetsu was looking at him with a shocked expression. Having heard the basic explanation, Fear was scowling with arms crossed whereas Kuroe

remained blank-faced as usual. The superintendent and Honatsu simply stared at him.

"Join forces?"

"Oh, oh~? Your proposal is truly fascinating."

Pendragon narrowed one eye while Pakuaki was all smiles.

"The same goes for you, Yamimagari Pakuaki. That's why I called you here."

"I thought so too. And what is your goal?"

Haruaki suddenly narrowed his eyes. Everything was for one purpose. To rescue Kirika safely. Putting that into words according to sequence—

"...Think of it as wanting to share information with you. You instigated Class Rep to go find that girl in order to fulfill some kind of objective, which means you won't stop just like that. Also... Ultimately, I don't think you'll abandon Class Rep to her fate."

Although Haruaki did not know if it was due to her being Pakuaki's precious little sister or because she was an important research subject, he could only take a gamble.

Pakuaki simply raised an eyebrow with interest. Then Haruaki faced Pendragon.

"I believe that the Draconians probably cannot ignore the strength of someone they've fought before. I think at least one of you guys went to attack her, right? It means that guy would know her location, right? Although Sleif has probably left the scene, it's enough to serve as a lead."

"Hmm..."

"Anyway, it's very simple. I want all of you to cooperate with us in order to rescue Class Rep."

Pendragon stroked his chin and asked with an intrigued expression.

It was short and practical, a question that could not be more natural.

"Our reward?"

"None."

Hearing Haruaki's instant reply, Pendragon's eyebrow twitched. Haruaki had thought of this already. This was the only answer that must be confronted in order to move forward. However, naturally, it did not really mean absolutely nothing at all.

"However, our home... The Yachi house will always remain as the Yachi house. This won't ever change. And this fact might perhaps serve as a reward."

"What do you mean, Yachi Haruaki?"

Haruaki exhaled, straightening his back on the chair. In front of him was the commander of a militant organization, possessing far greater strength than he, a man with the terrifying power to effortlessly take his life away.

However—Hence, so what?

As though to oppose him, Haruaki relaxed his cheeks and smiled.

"In other words, you guys can come over to play."

"What?"

Pendragon made a dumbfounded look. Konoha was totally hiding her face in her hands, her body shaking. Fear feigned calmness on the surface but was breathing quickly, her fingertips rapidly drumming audibly on her elbows.

"I said, you guys can come over to play. As long as you don't do anything weird, the Yachi house won't refuse you guys. As long as your side don't do anything evil or things that bother or harm others."

"..."

"As long as your side doesn't do any of that, I think we can assist you in training certain people to become strong. Rather than going at one another's lives, as long as proper rules are sent, we could hold something like sparring events for those who come to our house to play. Someone like Satsuko might even come over every day."

Then Haruaki immediately looked at Pakuaki who was still listening to him with eyes filled with interest.

"The same goes for the Lab Chief's Nation—whether you, Un Izoey or Amanda. If you visit the Yachi house, we'll at least serve you a cup of tea and if you wanted to know certain things, as long as nothing weird is done, we could chat with you guys and answer questions of your choice. Oh right, if some kind of athletic sparring happened to be going on, Un Izoey could help out if she's free."

While speaking, Haruaki looked at the dark-skinned girl behind Pakuaki. Looking at the back of her own boss' head with troubled eyes, she said:

"Yes. Hmm... if free. Body will become slow if not active for too long."

"You won't go as far as to limit this girl's personal movements, right?"

"Hoho, no. Naturally, if researchers wanted to go to a friend's house to play on a private basis, I can neither reprimand nor restrict them, even though I am the boss."

Pakuaki giggled.

Haruaki organized his thoughts for a moment first. Towards Pendragon and Pakuaki, the two of them, what he ought to say. When seeking their assistance, what kind of stance his own side ought to clarify.

"In other words—I believe that the Yachi house might be a place for contemplating connections between cursed tools and humans. I want to make this stance even clearer. And what I call connections could refer to the quest for

strength or the resolution of the unknown. So, there should be common ground for joining forces, right?"

"Conversely, there also exist differences that prevent us from joining forces, right?"

Pakuaki rested his chin on his hands whose fingers were interlocked, speaking with a malicious smile.

"Indeed, the issue of ominous curses exists between us. Not only do I want to prevent curses from causing trouble to others, but I also believe firmly that curses are better off lifted."

"Yes, we absolutely won't back down from this bottom line."

Fear finally spoke, her arms crossed and eyes closed, delivering heavy words.

Haruaki nodded at Fear then said:

"However—Just as Konoha applied self-suggestion to herself to faint at the sight of blood, just as Kotetsu relies on drinking tomato juice to curb his impulses, just as a doll, whose body's blades will kill its lover, can make do with simply hugging once the blades are destroyed... All kinds of shortcuts can be found even though everyone is different in situation and severity. The Lab Chief's Nation has probably investigated this area too, right?"

"Hmm, I can't say we haven't~"

"In other words, just let differences remain as differences, but we can at least establish an alliance based on the things we agree on, right? My house welcomes you guys any time. But if you guys do anything to harm or inconvenience others, we will do everything in our power to stop you."

"Existing in this manner, your side will stay at that house... Is that what you mean? Haha, taking on a clear stance, becoming a well-defined group of people,

your side wishes to stand on equal footing against organizations such as we of the Lab Chief's Nation or the Draconians. In that case—"

Saying that, Pakuaki's shoulders shook with mirth and he really looked like he was laughing happily. After letting everyone hear his laughter, he said:

"In a certain sense, perhaps this counts as establishing a new organization, 'Yachi House'? An organization contemplating the connections between cursed tools and humans. At the same time, also an organization that wants to lift curses. Unconcerned with the stances of other organizations, but under the overriding condition that ordinary people must not be harmed, is that correct? I see, I see."

"Ah..."

Is... that really the case? There was no major change from what they had been doing and what they had been thinking all along, simply articulated into words. Haruaki had simply made a clear declaration in front of Pakuaki and Pendragon, that was all. However, if this act carried significance and redefined their group—

Perhaps, it really was the case without a doubt.

"Very sufficient in combat potential, with Fear-in-Cube, Muramasa and Kotetsu... Furthermore, capable of gathering a number of Wathes if the summons are made. And in charge of information gathering, there is the one who is like a certain well-known mouse—"

"You mean the infamous wanted man who is fleeing all over the place? But that's quite a discourteous nickname~ Hmph, don't let this moniker take hold!"

Pakuaki glanced at Honatsu who was pouting in protest before looking at the superintendent.

"Finally, there is the financial backing. The former second-ranked Draconian whose charismatic leadership and social connections cannot underestimated."

"Apart from finances, I can't really agree with the rest. With neither charismatic leadership nor social connections, I'm just a mysterious businessman who wears a gas mask."

"Hahaha! Yes, anyway..."

Pakuaki rubbed his hands together as though worshiping then stared into space with deep thought. However, it only took several seconds of contemplation for him to reach a certain conclusion.

"Hmm, this is really too interesting! I really cannot ignore the fascinating developments of this unknown. Besides, this is currently an emergency. I've decided."

"D-Decided what?"

"Don't make me spell it out, okay? Kirika is my lovely little sister and I want to save her too. I shall accept your proposal. On this matter, the Lab Chief's Nation will offer their full cooperation to your Yachi House."

"...If only I could take your words at face value."

Probably feeling exhausted by the developments in the conversation, Konoha groaned extremely feebly.

"I'd be really distraught too if Kirika didn't return. I hope you all can believe me on this point. Until Kirika is rescued, I swear I won't lie or get any funny ideas."

Saying that, Pakuaki spread his hands and moved them upwards as though surrendering. To be honest, trying to trust Pakuaki completely would definitely leave unease in his heart, but Haruaki felt that Pakuaki was worth trusting on this one matter alone.

"So... What about you, Maximilian Pendragon, Commander of the Draconians?"

Fear glanced sideways at Pendragon and asked. With a fearless smile, he replied:

"Sparring at the Yachi house... huh? Indeed, Squishy-ko and her partner might be overjoyed, but to be honest, it's totally irrelevant to me. I have nothing to gain from it."

"...!"

Haruaki gasped. No way? No good? Pendragon was not willing to assist them? Fear and the others were also slowly getting more nervous. However—

At this moment, Pendragon suddenly turned his gaze, sweeping across the members of the group seated at the round table.

"...She's not here? That glasses-wearing chick with husky voice."

"Huh? Oh, you mean Chihaya? She doesn't live at our house, so she only comes by to play occasionally."

Haruaki was unsure of Pendragon's intent but he offered this answer for now. Pendragon swept his gaze again for another round.

"Hmm, then it means I might see her again any time. There's also that bunch of smiling girls who look identical, the beauty with a model's figure, the girl with the curly hair... as well as Muramasa, Kotetsu and Fear-in-Cube..."

"Let me make a prediction, how about me?"

Kuroe swiftly raised her hand and asked. Pendragon grinned while rubbing Riko's head as he answered:

"Haha~ Of course, with pretty hair and smooth skin, you are in my strike zone too! The evidence is this girl here! Tiny bodies are fine too. Tiny they may be, but there are all kinds of ways to play with them. Listen carefully, first of all—"

"Hey hey! What are you talking about!? I only kept quiet until now because the subject seemed very serious, but I was careless and underestimated the enemy!"

Her entire tiny face flushed red, Riko hammered her fists madly but Pendragon remained unfazed and looked at Haruaki whose eyes were narrowed.

"—I can't believe you gathered so many awesome girls, how rare. For me, this is quite a critical reason. Okay, I'll help you."

"I'm already feeling quite disturbed by how he made his decision to help out... Is it really okay?"

Fear groaned.

"Regrettably, he has always been like this."

"Yeah~ Copping a feel while passing by is totally commonplace for him."

"Truth be told, that is indeed the case. He has touched my buttocks who knows how many times."

Zenon, Ganon and even Kotetsu also nodded in agreement. How unsettling in this regard, but at least his personality could be considered upfront and honest.

Haruaki gulped and said:

"Then in other words—"

"The three-way alliance is hereby established? Looking forward to working with you, Mr. Pendragon."

"Anyway, until this incident is resolved, I'll need to tell my subordinates they're forbidden from making a move on the little lady there. Seeing as she's an opponent whom Kokoro Pentangeli ultimately failed to defeat, many of the members are very interested in her. However, it's really been a long time since I last met a dark-skinned woman. In other ways, I'm quite stoked too."

Listening to Pakuaki and Pendragon's conversation, Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief.

He had managed to secure these two's assistance. Although he had taken a gamble, Haruaki believed that chances of success were theoretically very high in the first place. That was precisely why he prioritized speed by asking Honatsu

somewhat forcefully to arrange the meeting. But because Haruaki had acted without consultation, he decided he must apologize to Konoha and the rest later.

Anyway, with this accomplished, one could say that things have moved forward.

However—Haruaki clenched his fists. It was too early to relax. Now was what could be considered the real beginning.

The goal that must be reached and accomplished was ahead.

(Class Rep, wait for us a little longer...!)

Then once the goal was accomplished, once she was rescued safe and sound...

He was no longer afraid.

He had already decided: He was not going to run away again. He must convey his thoughts and feelings to her clearly.

And tell her the answer he had delayed all this time.

After that, Fear kept paying close attention to developments for the most part.

"Oh, hello? I want to ask you something. Along the way back to Dragon Island, one of our members ran into someone from the Knights Dominion, right? Yeah, that shameful guy, the one who met the enemy by chance, went up to attack but ended up running home with one arm severed. His name was very weird... Something like Kurusonzan? Yes yes yes, that's him, that's him."

After Pendragon made a call to someone, a small boat was launched from another ship and came over to this dueling ship. A young and heavily injured Draconian appeared on deck to report where he had attacked Sleif but ended up getting defeated utterly.

"Hmph, this area huh? Roughly what time? Hmm, I see. In that case—"

With highly experienced motions, Pakuaki labeled this information on the map that was spread over the table. The pen was spun with exceptional fluidity.

Labeled on the map was not only the obtained location where the Draconian had attacked rashly but also all the places where random slashings had occurred. In addition—

"Actually, we were also able to discover bloodstains through Kotetsu's sense of smell. We have been searching in those areas the whole time earlier—although no further clues were found in the end."

"Oh? And did those bloodstains vanish?"

"Yes, they vanished while I was watching them."

"Then that was surely Kirika's blood. In fact, we too have found several locations with bloodstains. Since bloodstains were still linger at the scenes, it meant that «Gimestorante's Love» was still in the process of healing wounds using its cursed power. In other words, we missed them by a hair's breadth. What a shame."

"...You guys were searching too?"

"I have mentioned that she is my precious little sister, right? Although she might not think so. Anyway, adding the couple places where only bloodstains were found... Yes."

Pakuaki spun the pen while looking down at the map. Haruaki and company also examined the map from their various vantage points around the table.

"Ha~ This feels like quite a common pattern."

"Seriously, it's too easy to understand."

"But... it's impossible to determine without a large amount of data in this case, so it's all thanks to you guys."

Pakuaki shrugged as though saying "you won't gain anything by praising me."

"Well then, let us confirm what is known so far. Judging according to the cases so far, the knight's crimes are always committed according to specific rules. One of them is 'always on soil.' Whether phantom slashings, Kirika's blood or where the Draconian attacked recklessly, there were no exceptions. Another point is very easy and clear to see once visualized like this—*One can deduce that she is moving around this town in the shape of a circle.*"

Precisely. Fear looked down at the map. Starting from the beach where Pakuaki marked the first incident, it looked like someone was tracing a large circle. Of course, there were large gaps in between, but—

"These areas are simply the ones we couldn't confirm, right? Also—Suppose these actions were undertaken with some sort of intent, the enemy probably won't cut through the middle of the circle suddenly or move in the opposite direction."

"In other words, we can conclude that she will be moving along the circumference, right?"

The superintendent exhaled under the gas mask and said that. Pakuaki nodded. While continuing to spin his pen, he spoke with exaggeration like a magician:

"Indeed. So—Considering the time intervals and movement distances between crimes, the next crime scene can be predicted with extremely high certainty to be this area."

Then he stabbed a point on the map.

It was near the sea. If one were to continue further along the shore from that point, they would return to the beach in the beginning. Since the enemy was moving in a circle, returning to the starting point was only natural as well.

Haruaki's demeanor was solemn.

"So we're going to set up an ambush...!?"

"Having said that, her route is not following a perfectly accurate circle. The intervals in movement distance are also not that meticulous, varying quite a bit, so all I can guess is this general area."

"I think that would be good enough already. After all, limiting to places with exposed soil, we should be able to narrow it down to a couple locations."

Konoha offered her comment while staring at the map, prompting Pakuaki to put his pen into motion.

"Yes... This should be the main one, while other ambushes should be set up here and here... And this place is last? Of course, you guys should wait at the most major location with focused combat potential to intercept her, right? As for one of the secondary ambush points here, Un Izoey and I will take care of it."

"Then, Zenon-kun, Ganon-kun and I will be responsible for the other one. As soon as we encounter her, we stall her while contacting the main team... This should barely pull through, right?"

"No helping it, I'll send out a few youngsters from my side, similarly to take on interception and communication roles. But it's possible they might include fellows who act rashly and get hurt."

The superintendent and Pendragon offered their various opinions. It looked like they had just enough manpower.

Staring intently at the map, Haruaki nodded forcefully.

"Then let's move out immediately. There could be variations in the time intervals between crimes. Waiting is fine, but arriving later than her would be bad, so we must hurry... Fear? You look a bit dazed, is anything wrong?"

Fear suddenly regained her senses and shook her head.

"No—The main event is up so I was just cheering for myself."

"Good idea, then let's get going!"

Haruaki was the first to leave the round table and start walking. Konoha and the others followed after him. With eyes narrowed, Fear trailed behind as the last person in the group, following Haruaki.

"Sigh~ For a moment I was worried with no idea how things would turn out, but now it seems like favorable developments are heading our way, so I won't nag... By the way, putting this incident aside, it's quite nice to see Haruaki-kun so manly, putting a plan into motion with such force and vigor. Fufufu."

"Oh, Kono-san, are you falling in love with Haru all over again~?"

"What are you talking about? But yes, it is precisely the case."

"Hmph. Truth be told, that sort of level doesn't totally count as manliness yet... A real man should be like Isami-sama, stronger and more powerful, stern and awe-inspiring..."

Konoha and the others talked while walking with Haruaki. Two powerful swords. One gentle doll. A man in a gas mask and the loyal pair of sisters behind him.

These were not the only people around Haruaki, because others also sprang into action.

"By the way, is your foot okay? You got hurt earlier, right?"

"My response: an instant answer of no problem. This level of small injury will heal in one night just by applying tribe's traditional *nuuponhi*."

"Wow, what is that? Truly a term of the unknown, what is it like?"

"Yes. Not sure how to say in this country's language? Although unknown, the main ingredient is made by grinding that thing which you frequently find under floorboards or in rubbish dumps—"

"Stop! I have a bad feeling about this! Please discuss this somewhere out of our earshot!"

The dark-skinned girl. The tribal warrior. The person who could extend her long legs in high-speed combat. As well as the leader of the Lab Chief's Nation that sought knowledge above all else.

Next, Haruaki looked to the side.

"So, you're coming with us too?"

"Hey, how could I not stay with the main team? But I won't make a move, that's all."

"Since you won't make a move, it ends up raising the question of why are you following..."

"Because watching the battle seems very fun. Also, pa—Nothing."

"Ah! Hey, this guy definitely wanted to say that 'faint glimpses of panties might be possible'!"

Presumably stronger than anyone, the Commander of the Draconians. As well as the two cursed tools in his possession.

Ahhh—Fear was savoring an unbelievable feeling.

What an unusual sight. What an unusual view.

Before her eyes, Haruaki was surrounded by all kinds of people, human and non-human.

Whether Haruaki or herself, neither of them was alone.

For some reason, Haruaki's back looked even bigger than yesterday's.

Spreading from her chest was a sense of security that also resembled loneliness.

Carrying this unusual and warm feeling, Fear thought to herself.

(Really? Perhaps... my power... is actually already...)

He turned his head to look back with a gentle face, calling to she who was walking too slow.

Fear relaxed her cheeks and returned a smile, quickening her pace.

Catching up, she joined the circle around him like everyone else.

Even so, she did not say a word. Silence was good enough. Walking forward with a coordinated pace was good enough. Naturally, this was so.

Surely, she need not worry.

Just by staying beside him, she would definitely receive a smile from him.

Chapter 4 - He Who Is Cursed / "Her rebirth (x2)"

Part 1

It turned out that Pakauki's prediction was correct.

A seaside road. Although one called it that, the road surface was not paved at all. It was just a bumpy path only used by local residents. One side was a rusted railing adjacent to the sea while the other side was a dense forest.

Just as the footsteps walking on this road halted, Haruaki's group dashed out from the forest.

"Muu..."

"Sleif! Resistance is futile!"

Fear conjured her executioner's blade and swung the hatchet at the knight before her while she spoke. She looked like she had been spacing out for a moment just earlier, but now she seemed more energetic than before.

Wearing the visor-like helmet, Sleif had the rapier sheathed at her waist and the spear secured to her back, identical in appearance with last time. But currently—she was dragging a giant trunk, large enough to hold a person inside as well.

A surge of rage shot up in Haruaki's mind at the sight. He could not suppress his emotions anymore.

"Konoha!"

"No helping it, but please don't overexert yourself!"

Konoha transformed into a Japanese sword with a "poof" and Haruaki caught her. What a nostalgic feeling.

At this moment, Haruaki noticed Fear glancing sideways at him. Then her gaze shifted away from him to Kotetsu who was stepping forwards with a shake of his fingers.

"What? Have you words for me?"

Hearing Kotetsu's question, Fear said "...no" and shook her head lightly. Haruaki could hear her whisper extremely softly to herself:

"...Cow Tits is back safe and sound and looks like she's cast off some kind of burden compared to before. Also, there's Kotetsu who's about the same as me, or even better at fighting... I guess. Surely I don't need to worry after all—"

For merely an instant, her lips twisted in a wry grin then after that—

Fear sternly faced forward again with a shake of her silver hair.

"Anyway, we just need to put in everything we got! Let's go!"

"O-Oh!"

"I don't need you to tell me that!"

With Fear in the lead, the three of them charged to attack. Sleif threw the trunk away brashly and swiftly drew out the rapier from its scabbard.

"Foolish to the extreme. You shall only repeat the same mistake."

"That's right~ It'd be too boring if the same mistake is repeated."

Pendragon commented leisurely from his role as the audience. Although Haruaki thought "in that case, why don't you help!?", saying anything at this point would be pointless. That being said, the audience was not limited to Pendragon, Riko sitting on his shoulder and Granaury beside him—

"Fear-san and everyone, do your best~"

For some reason, even Satsuko and Fourteen were present as well. They had apparently passed on another place's monitoring duties to lower ranking members, coming to watch like their boss. Haruaki really wished they would help out.

However, there was currently no luxury of attention to spare for what was happening behind them. Haruaki and Fear attacked Sleif together, but like last time, she used the rapier to block attacks in a slippery manner.

Un Izoey had already informed them that this was «Karma Speed»—a cursed rapier that could absorb speed then release the accumulated energy in the form of a giant slashing attack. Hence, a quick barrage of impetuous attacks would only enable the enemy to launch the counterattack technique sooner.

"Mmm! Haah—What's this? Too gentle, Wathes, you embodiments of repugnance."

"You're the one... who's more repugnant, right? After figuring out your secret, I have a rough idea now."

"Hmph. Truth be told, I shall be blunt. Your moaning is the result of pleasure."

"You're probably under a curse that makes you addicted to speed, right? The more you receive fast attacks, the more aroused you get, something like that?"

"This is nothing but a lowly Wathe—the counterattack technique developed by a weak and sickly nobleman simply by exploiting the opponent's speed at the cost of sacrificing his own strength, so as to guarantee a kill against his mortal enemy in duel. However, that first victory won by fanatical delusion caused the nobleman to acquire an obsession and sense of pleasure from speed... What a contemptible story!"

Sleif focused on defense and blocked all their attacks, slowly storing up the speed. However, this time was different from the previous in a number of ways. First of all, Haruaki was taking part in the battle. In other words, Konoha had transformed into a Japanese sword.

"Although the feeling during impacts were very odd, so it took me quite a while, want to try it?"

"...It's a bit late to ask, but will it really be okay?"

"Because I've moved beyond my former phase of wanting only to escape my past. I am myself, the me who loves Haruaki-kun dearly."

Haruaki groaned.

"Hey, now's not the time for saying this!"

"My apologies. However, I said what I did in order to cheer myself on. Since I'm going to do it, I have to take care so that her head doesn't get sliced off in the wake."

Konoha's tone of voice sounded like she was mischievously sticking her tongue out, but in the next instant, her voice turned cold and full of vigor, almost enough to freeze one's spine with terror.

"Very well—Attack...!"

This was undoubtedly her voice too. Inside herself, another voice of hers. Haruaki felt neither fear nor hesitation and simply listened to that carnivorous voice with trust.

"«True-Kill Counter»!"

"Ohhhhhhhhh!"

This was not the Sword-Kill Counter that destroyed weapons utterly just by using the force from the enemy's attack. Instead, this was the True-Kill Counter that destroyed weapons by manifesting Muramasa's yaksha-like existence of pure sharpness. Since it did not require coordination with the enemy's attack, it had the advantage of being able to handle Sleif's style of pure defense. Although the attack had the drawback of possibly harming the enemy in its wake, Konoha was currently taking a minimum level of caution to avoid harming the enemy's life. Hence, even though it was inferior to the full-powered «Counter», this strike should be able to achieve 80% of the effect—

Drawn out, Konoha's white blade made contact with «Karma Speed». The Japanese sword's sleek blade, so frighteningly beautiful, versus the slender rapier. It seemed obvious which one was going to break, but—

The fact that Konoha's blade was visible was in itself an anomaly. Originally supposed to return to the scabbard instantly, she still remained in the process of being drawn. In other words—

Even the speed of Konoha's «True-Kill Counter» had been absorbed entirely by «Karma Speed». Then through the deprivation of speed, this blade-shattering attack had been neutralized.

"Guh...!"

"Mmm! Ah, haa, gufu ahhhh... Mmm, ah, eee—!"

Konoha groaned whereas Sleif's back shuddered violently after she moaned especially loudly and seductively. Konoha took this opportunity to retract her blade back into the black scabbard. Continuing to fight with the blade unsheathed

seemed to be too risky in all respects. Ultimately on a fundamental level, Konoha still did not enjoy bloodshed and harming others.

"Ahhhh... Awe-inspiring as ever. Truth be told, I believe it would be best if Muramasa-sama stayed in that form all the time..."

"Hey, now isn't the time to get excited! But it looks like you're not the only one, that's all."

Fear lightly shoved Kotetsu in the back while his eyes were glazed over, meanwhile looking ahead.

Panting with drool dripping down a corner of her mouth in a trance, Sleif raised «Karma Speed» at the same time.

"Well... done. However, that move... definitely very fast. Thanks to that—"

"Looks like she's stored enough... Haruaki, what do we do!? Are you putting *that* into motion!?"

"To be honest, I don't want to at all, but damn it, I've no choice but to believe!"

In case Konoha's weapon destroying move failed, they still had a backup plan. If possible, they wanted to avoid using it because the effects were uncertain. Only a certain key figure had promoted the plan with great confidence. But instead of standing there, watching the giant slashing attack arrive, it was better to take a gamble.

Fear first went into action. To halt «Karma Speed»'s motion, she threw her hatchet forcefully.

"Mechanism No.27 grinding type, cog-wheel form: «Gear Wheel Trismegistus»—Curse Calling!"

While the hatchet halted after its speed was absorbed, she forcibly transformed it then ordered the interlocking gears to turn, trying to ensnare Sleif's rapier into the device. However—

"Naive! That is still speed!"

"What!?"

The turning of the gears—even the speed of the gears themselves was absorbed by «Karma Speed», halting the mechanism's operation. However, Haruaki was already dashing forward while Sleif was withdrawing her sword. He swung Konoha's metal scabbard but Sleif defended in time. Another slippery attack sensation. At the same time, Kotetsu attacked the sword with a tiger-clawed strike. Although the speed was absorbed, this was expected and Kotetsu took the opportunity to curl his fingers from the tiger claw and seize «Karma Speed»'s blade.

Hence, Konoha's metal scabbard and Kotetsu were both pinning down the rapier at the same time. Immediately, Kotetsu performed a flip while using the hand holding the rapier as support.

"Take that!"

While holding the rapier, he forcefully performed a spinning kick. Although Fear had created the opportunity while Konoha was providing cover with the metal scabbard, Kotetsu was able to overpower the blade with pure strength while executing a powerful flying kick only because of his arm strength and determination. Once the kick landed, the battle should be decided. However—

"—!"

Sleif ducked down in that instant and leaned back, dodging Kotetsu's flying kick in the air. Using her momentum from turning her body, she intended to pull out «Karma Speed»&,dash;

However, she had already lost balance completely.

And the trump card in their plan was not Kotetsu but the girl who had been hiding from the start in the adjacent forest, biding her time.

(Will this really work...!?)

Reflected in Haruaki's view was Kuroe, using her hair as a slingshot, shooting herself as the projectile, fling out from the forest behind Sleif.

Furthermore, her hair was writhing at high speed, curling like a vortex—

Wrapping around her petite limbs.

"I invented this super finishing move through my own evolution, its name being..."

Then with a serious expression unlike usual, she yelled out the name of the move:

"This is Mode: «Kingdom Kiyomori»!"

In the next second, the hair wrapped around her arms and legs glowed. It was the same brightness that lit up momentarily during treatments. The light that Kuroe had emitted in the living room early this morning. Indeed, this was the move she was inventing and practicing at the time. Since it was giving off the same light as during treatment, one could infer that this move used the life force she had gathered from other people's hair.

According to Kuroe, this move enhanced the physical body's strength by delivering life force from the hair wrapped around the body, then used her hair to strengthen her own movements like wearing a powersuit.

Back in the beginning when they were coming up with a plan for dealing with Sleif if the ambush succeeded in encountering Sleif, Kuroe had offered this suggestion of hers. Everyone had personally confirmed the whole process with their own eyes until this step, but actually going through with the move would apparently consume a large amount of energy, so they were uncertain how much of an effect there would be in practice. What would happen? Haruaki really hoped it would turn out as Kuroe claimed—

"GO—!"

Instantly, Kuroe vanished. Rather, she had simply taken a step forward instantaneously. Simply because her speed was compressed like a flash, Haruaki's eyes had failed to keep up with her moving figure.

"Wow! This is way too fast...!"

Before Fear could finish moaning, Kuroe had already closed in behind Sleif who had lost her balance. Raising her arm, wrapped in glowing hair, she punched with speed faster than the naked eye could follow. The action itself was not well-trained, but the speed and strength were enough to shake the air.

Truly, this was almost like Hinai Elsie's «Clockwork Life»—an ability for total physical enhancement. That being said, Kuroe had mentioned that the effects only persisted for just a moment unlike Elsie's that could last up to four minutes.

But right now, reaching that level for just an instant would be enough already. Sleif had lost balance. While «Karma Speed» was restrained by Kotetsu and Konoha and only half drawn out with difficulty, Sleif totally could not react. If there was anything Sleif could do—

"Guoh—!"

Probably a last ditch struggle. Keeping the unnatural kneeling posture with her body leaned back, Sleif moved her unoccupied left hand to block Kuroe's fist.

Truly futile resistance. No matter how small Kuroe's fist was, it could not possibly be blocked by a mere hand. A fist rivaling Hinai Elsie's would effortlessly crush her left palm—

"...Huh?"

But it did not.

Kuroe made a shocked sound then a loud crash was heard from the contact point between the fist and the palm as though two cars had collided head on. At the same time, Sleif finally freed her right hand's «Karma Speed» from their restraints. The instant the blade regained its freedom—

"—This is... karma!"

"Watch out, Haruaki-kun!"

"Uwahhhhhh!"

After drawing out the rapier, Sleif raised it high and swung, producing a giant mass of slicing pressure. Due to swinging her sword forcibly in an unnatural posture, the slicing pressure was directly almost vertically upwards, but at such a close range, they could not possibly stay unaffected. With much difficulty, Haruaki used Konoha's blade to protect himself but was still blown back a large amount. Compared to attacking with definite aim, Sleif had apparently prioritized recovering her position.

Thanks to Konoha controlling his body, Haruaki managed to land safely in fall-breaking posture.

"...What about Kotetsu?"

"I am fine. Although that was a close call."

"Fear is okay, right?"

"Yeah. Rather, Kuroe, this isn't what you promised!"

"Oh my~ Seriously. I already succeeded in following the plan, but didn't expect a major miscalculation elsewhere..."

Probably failing in breaking her fall properly, Kuroe suddenly sat up from the ground. The light covering her entire body scattered and disappeared without trace, then—Just as she lifted up the right arm she had used to punch earlier, the hair wrapped around it fell apart.

All of the hair was cut.

"What a miscalculation. I didn't think she was not human, *but one of our kind instead.*"

"Are you for real...!"

Haruaki groaned but there was no other answer. Capable of stopping that kind of attack from Kuroe with just a bare hand. Capable of slicing Kuroe's hair barehanded by mere contact. Like Konoha and Kotetsu, she possessed the trait of blades?

"How paradoxical and inexplicable. Clearly an existence like us, why would she become a knight...!?"

"Not paradoxical. Wathes giving off the stench of corpses are too contemptible and should not exist in this world. They should all be destroyed—myself included."

Beneath the helmet, her emotionless eyes were piercing them with her gaze. In the end, it only felt paradoxical and that there was a mistake somewhere. Her declaration made it sound like she desired suicide. A knight most unsuited to becoming a knight.

(Damn it, what now...?)

The plan had failed and must start over again. They needed to break through the rapier's defense again to defeat Sleif and rescue Kirika. But now that Kuroe was exposed as the trump card, the same tactics probably could not be used a second time. Kuroe also seemed unsteady like her stamina was exhausted, so the move was most likely impossible to use in succession. What to do—

Just at this time—

Sleif turned her head in surprise.

Haruaki looked back slightly to see someone, who had been motionless so far, walking over.

Pendragon. For some reason, his gaze was very harsh.

"Hey~? What are you doing? Aren't we just watching? I hate troublesome things!"

"Unexpected work would be truly a pain/worthy of doing, how bothersome."

It was unclear whether Pendragon heard those two, but he continued to turn his gaze with a solemn expression—For some reason, Haruaki felt that he had apparently glanced at Kuroe once.

But then Pendragon faced forward again and relaxed his expression somewhat unnaturally.

"Haha~ No, because it's really too boring if I just keep watching all the way. My entire body was starting to get impatient and restless, so I feel like it should be fine to make one move at least. Don't worry, I won't be using you two, so relax."

"Muu, that also feels quite annoying. Oh well, whatever..."

"Relieved/regretful. Well then, we shall standby here, Master."

Granaury halted her steps and watched her master from behind. Haruaki blinked and asked:

"Y-You're going to help? Why this sudden change of heart?"

"Hmm~ ...Compared to not having enough time to watch patiently, it's better to say I've tired of just watching. I also feel that it's time for things to end. So, you guys don't need to do anything."

"Hmph. This confidence is unbelievable. Then do as you like."

"Well then, show us your power."

At this moment, the Japanese sword in Haruaki's hand moved slightly as though looking at Kotetsu in puzzlement.

Kotetsu inhaled hard and used his sleeve to wipe sweat away. Relaxing his fingers that were tensed in the tiger claw stance, he shook his arm and adjusted his loosened sash—

Probably noticing their gaze, Kotetsu sighed again and said in a helpless voice:

"—Everything is over. Now that the Commander is making a move personally, a knight of that level has no chance of winning even though she is a Wathe. There is nothing we can help anymore."

Pendragon walked forward confidently while allowing Riko to continue sitting on his shoulder. Sleif readied «Karma Speed». The distance between them grew shorter and shorter. Sleif hesitated for only a few seconds but seeing no change in Pendragon's movements, she backed away greatly as though resolving herself—

"There we go."

"—!"

Nevertheless, without looking like he had accelerated in particular, Pendragon somehow took a few great strides, inexplicably closing in on Sleif. He had not adjusted time like Nirushaaki—it was most likely purely the result of footwork. Simply because his level was too high, it appeared as though the steps in between had been skipped.

Pendragon slowly, truly slowly, extended his arm.

Sleif raised «Karma Speed» in a stance, groaning at the incomprehensible character who was attacking her. Even though she tried to pull back, Pendragon kept following her closely. The only thing that remained constant was his extending arm. Calmly without hurry. Even when Sleif turned around or jumped, their distance remained the same. As though stuck to her, Pendragon remained right next to her the whole time.

Then that gradually extending arm, with a frighteningly relaxed motion—in other words, using just the back of his hand to lightly push «Karma Speed»'s blade aside—he penetrated her defense. Immediately, as though touching a soap

bubble, he reached Sleif's body with a gentle motion. Specifically, his hand reached the bulge on her chest.

"Hmm, on the slightly small side, but quite pretty, shape-wise. B cup, I'd say?"

"! You bastard...!"

Sleif groaned. Just as Riko was about to protest against his act of sexual harassment—

In that instant, Pendragon's body lowered slightly and shook once. At least that was what it looked like to Haruaki. It was truly a subtle shift in center of gravity. However, the displacement force produced from that motion was amplified instantaneously, transmitted through his arm, his palm then to Sleif's chest in contact—

"What... Guahhhhh!"

As though struck by a dump truck, Sleif's body flew into the air while spinning rapidly. No, describing the collision as like a dump truck's was not enough. Like a kicked football, like a ruptured humanoid balloon, her body flew high up over the trees, disappearing on the far end of the nearby forest. Probably due to the intense spinning which caused the knot to loosen, the *spear* on her back flew out during the process, falling in the opposite direction—beyond the railing, down the seaside cliffs.

Looking at the forest where Sleif had flown, Pendragon said:

"Wow, she flew even farther than imagined... Oh right, she's not human so she's very light. And a B as well."

"That has nothing to do with anything!"

Sleif was knocked so far away that it was hard to muster motivation to find her. Pendragon simply scratched his head without showing any intention to move.

Held in Haruaki's hand, Konoha murmured in a tone as though gulping:

"The *fa jin* concept of explosive force generated at extremely close quarters huh... What truly experienced motions...!"

"The previous Commander was an expert in martial arts. This man apparently trained under the previous Commander's tutelage."

Kotetsu nodded and said:

"Since speed will be absorbed, the solution is to use speed that cannot be absorbed... Thus, it would suffice to decide the match in one strike by inflicting an attack that does not have speed. Easy to express in words, of course, but truth be told, it is not something that could be casually performed—"

"Hmm~ Due to the swaying, I was wondering if this was a dream, but it's reality, right? I never thought it'd end so easily~ Clearly I tried so hard too."

"Although it's unclear what happened to the enemy... Whatever, our main goal wasn't to kill her in the first place. Haruaki, go rescue Kirika!"

"Yeah!"

The group rushed over to the trunk that had remained where Sleif had abandoned it at her feet. Along the way, Haruaki hastily thanked Pendragon.

"Sorry, but I'm so grateful for your help! Thank you!"

"Oh sure... Don't worry about it."

Pendragon answered without even looking at Haruaki, narrowing his eyes again as though he was concerned about something. What his eyes were focused on, was it the forest where Sleif had disappeared into? Or—

(..?)

Haruaki was a bit puzzled by the sight of Pendragon's expression, but to be honest, he had no thoughts to spare on the matter right now.

"Class Rep!"

Hence, after expressing his thanks, within the few steps it took to reach the trunk, this trivial detail had already vanished completely from Haruaki's mind.

Fear was so impatient that she swung her hatchet directly to lop off the trunk's latch without even checking to see if it was locked or not. Haruaki frantically opened the trunk—then gasped.

"Kirika...!"

"C-Class Rep!"

Picking Kirika up in his arms, Haruaki pulled her body out from the trunk.

She was a tragic sight with her clothing tattered, almost in a half-naked state, her bondage suit exposed. There were no wounds on her body, due to the power of her curse. However—

Her gaze was extremely hollow.

"A-Ah..."

She moved her lips slightly. It was unclear whether her half-open eyes recognized the people around her.

Having turned back to human form unnoticed and swiftly put on the clothing that Kotetsu had handed to her reverently, Konoha walked over and examined Kirika with a frown.

"Consciousness hazy... Oxygen deprivation..? But that's only natural after being locked up in such conditions..."

However, Fear felt that it was not the only reason. The emotions in Kirika's gaze appeared to be identical to what Fear had witnessed in the eyes of people standing before her in the past back when she was a tool of torture.

Indeed—Despair.

At this moment, Kirika parted her lips again. This time, her voice was slightly louder than before, just beyond a moan, delivering a sentence. A sentence that no one would want to hear.

"K-Kill... me..."

"!? Class Rep, what are you talking about!?"

"I beg you... please... stop using me... to do that..."

"Kirika, pull yourself together!"

"Ueno-san!"

"Class Rep, it's fine now. We've already defeated that girl, so you don't need to worry anymore. Class Rep!"

Haruaki grabbed Kirika's shoulders and shook hard, but her gaze remained hollow.

"...Better off... simply dead... who will... take this off..."

"Class Rep!"

Haruaki exerted more force. His voice carried anger. He was probably unable to accept this. Why was Kirika saying these things? Words that Fear absolutely did not want to hear. Words she did not want to hear from Kirika's lips.

Haruaki's eyes were narrowed in pain while he started to exert greater force through his arms.

Whether the kind of gaze he was showing or the violent therapy he was inflicting on Kirika, Fear did not want to see either.

Also... There was a simpler solution.

Hence, after Fear closed her eyes to calm herself—

"Here I go—!"

With a poker face, she crashed into Haruaki's back with all her might.

"Uwah!?"

Haruaki could not have predicted her action, hence his body fell forward with Kirika still in his arms.

No helping it. Refusing to watch Haruaki hitting others, Fear could only come up with this kind of shock therapy. In other words, shock therapy through human skin contact. Haruaki could embrace her more tightly. Through body warmth and his sturdy chest, he could express his presence to Kirika more. No helping it, Fear would allow it just this one time—that was what she thought.

"Ah."

However, because Haruaki was too unguarded, the result went beyond what she was expecting.

After losing balance, while holding Kirika tightly in his arms, Haruaki's face also crashed towards her. At the same time, with inexplicable coincidence, Kirika received his face with the exact same body part.

In other words—

"Mmmuh..!?"

"Hmm...?"

Haruaki's lips were pressed against Kirika's lips.

"Heeee!? Y-You... What are you doing—!?"

"Uwah, I guess this is shock therapy?"

Like the subject of a certain painting, Konoha was screaming with her hands squeezing her cheeks. Kuroe was whispering to herself, somewhat pleased.

Kuroe was right. Although the result had gone beyond Fear's expectations, at least the shock therapy of human skin contact was taking effect as predicted. Rather, an effect several times more potent than she predicted must have occurred. Since she had discovered Kirika's feelings a long time ago, she knew that this act performed by Haruaki would surely jolt her with massive shock.

"..."

Naturally, the impulse to pull these two apart also arose reflexively in her heart.

However, only in this instant did she suppress it.

Because there was a reason. Pouting, Fear simply watched those two.

Those two's lips. Especially something inside Kirika's mouth seemed to move once inside Haruaki's mouth. Haruaki's eyes kept spinning, his entire body frozen.

"...Mmm... Mmm... Mmm...?"

In this manner, after some time passed...

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!?"

Kirika blinked hard once then her eyes rotated left and right intensely, followed by another blink, then as though she finally grasped the current situation—

"P-Puhah!? Y-Yachi, Y-Y-Y-Y-Yachi!? W-What, w-w-w-w-what!?"

"No, you misunderstand! No! Umm!"

"Absolutely ridiculous, absolutely... absolutely ridiculous...!"

Kirika was flushed red in the face. Haruaki was still holding her by the shoulders. Konoha regained her senses.

"It's fine, waking up Ueno-san is fine! But Fear-san, I must protest against your methods, why did you do that!?"

"H-Hmph, like it matters..."

Indeed. It mattered not.

Arms crossed, Fear turned her face away and muttered in her own heart.

This was what one would call a necessary evil. Indeed, what just happened was an unfortunate accident beyond prediction. She did not wish to see it but at least it was better than Haruaki hitting Kirika. This could not be helped. Also, this was also a chance to emphasize the extent of her generosity and open-mindedness, so there was nothing bad about it. Emphasize to who? Who knew. Perhaps it was to God. Anyway, she did not mind.

Because, after returning home next, she was going to—

"I intend... to do something even more shocking..."

She simply murmured inside her mouth. Presumably her cheeks reddened as well.

Simply imagining it was making her very embarrassed.

In the end—

She was going to ignore the accident just now, because seeing as she was generous and open-minded enough to forgive Kirika for that moment of blissful embarrassment, the embarrassing behavior she intended to engage in next would surely be forgiven, right? She was not hogging benefits all to herself, so no one had the right to complain—In a certain sense, this could be considered advance payment for an indulgence in the classical sense.

Part 2

Then Haruaki stared intently at Kirika in his arms. Her cheeks were blushing red. She had apparently recovered consciousness. However, there were some thing that must be said. At the bottom of his heart—There was anger.

"Class Rep."

"Ah..."

From her upwards gaze, he could tell that she had noticed the anger in his heart.

"Please, never say... you want to die... or anything like that. Why did you..."

"...Sorry..."

"Why?"

Kirika shook her head lightly.

"I must not say, and I don't want to say either..."

She looked like a scolded child. In fact, he was currently scolding her, reprimanding her. No matter what—He did not want her to give up her own life.

Even so, it was a fact that her warmth was currently held in his embrace. A pleasant temperature. Soft and tender skin.

Haruaki exhaled.

"...Let's call us even, this time."

"Huh...?"

Still staring at her, Haruaki said:

"Me too—I also did something you found unforgivable, Class Rep. I did something for which I must apologize to you. So—"

"What is... that...?"

He could only reply honestly, for that was also his wish.

"So far, I've never seriously pondered this matter using your perspective from the bottom of my heart, Class Rep. I haven't tried to understand what feelings you were carrying in your heart while confessing to me. That was why I said

something like 'hoping for the status quo'—That's what I want to apologize for. I'm sorry."

"...It's good... you understand."

Then after a long period of time, Kirika looked up and asked him:

"Then, umm, your answer...?"

"Yes, I will answer you. I-I..."

He gulped.

After putting his fearfully trembling throat under control...

"I probably... love you, Class Rep."

"...!"

Kirika raised her head as though bouncing up. Haruaki could sense flustered reactions from Konoha and Fear behind him. However, Haruaki decided to ignore that side for now.

"You're both smart and pretty, if I try to imagine it, I'd also get a very happy feeling. Like what if we could have meals together, study together, go out to have fun together... But—"

"But?"

Kirika's eyes were shrouded with unease.

Scratching his head, Haruaki then said:

"But for some reason, you're not the only person in the picture. Like Fear and Konoha are also present."

"Oh..."

Kirika's eyes drifted and she sighed. With her head lowered, she kept silent, but soon after—

"You're... right, that's obvious. I—"

"Oh~ Hold on, Class Rep. I'm not finished yet. Uh... From a more basic level, I actually don't quite understand what dating is about. How should I put this? If I were to date you, Class Rep... I'd end up thinking instead: 'Isn't it a bit late to ask?' Although it's quite weird expressed like this."

"Eh?"

"How should I put this? You've stayed over at our house occasionally, right? We're together most of the time, fighting dangerous enemies, staying in dangerous places, working hard together to solve all kinds of mysteries. So, in my heart—you're *already beyond the domain of whether to date you or not. Rather, you belong somewhere even deeper in my heart, impossible to cut out.*"

Kirika stared wide-eyed. Haruaki did not know what she meant and could only continue:

"Just like family. So, I can only imagine you together with Fear and Konoha— And that image makes me feel very happy. So—"

Although there were still many parts he did not understand...

Very clearly, from the bottom of his heart, what he desired was—

"I cannot accept life without you staying by my side."

He truly believed that.

"But, however—"

"I know. About what counts as 'staying by my side'... Class Rep, you confessed your feelings to me because you want to clarify our relationship, because you want to know how, in what way. So, do you want to confirm this first then take the next step forward?"

Haruaki then smiled.

And said the words he had decided long ago.

"Come live together at our house, Class Rep."

"Wha—"

Kirika's eyes widened and her mouth gaped, frozen.

"Naturally, I'd overjoyed if you moved in. Because I love you, Class Rep. I'd be very happy to be able to see you any time. Oh, but what I mean isn't that you must lift your curse! No, I do indeed hope you'll lift it, but that doesn't constitute any reason... Uh, how should I explain this? Anyway, that point is only secondary, no, of course it's very important too, uh~ But this fact won't count as minus element—"

Crap. After making the main points, as soon as he relaxed, his speech became broken and disorganized. Haruaki frantically tried to reorganize his thoughts and words, but—

"...Really? I think I get it now."

Kirika slowly blinked then whispered as though speaking for herself to hear:

"In the end—I was too bound by the act of confession itself. All I did was use the escapist excuse of 'at any rate' as a shield, but never have I considered what kind of ending would be best, in a very true sense... You're very right. Perhaps my confession wasn't healthy—Although it's absolutely ridiculous."

"Uh—in other words, I only said that because all I knew was my own situation. How willful of me, yes. Speaking willfully, I'd like to make that home an even happier place, which requires your presence, Class Rep. That's the truth. So, I hope you'll move in. That's all I can say at the moment."

Kirika's lips curled with a chuckle as though she could not endure any longer. While laughing, she said quietly:

"S-Seriously... absolutely ridiculous. Hoho! This is almost like a propo... But it's probably not. Haha..."

"Umm... Class Rep?"

"I'll go."

Hearing Kirika answer so readily, Haruaki ended up having difficulty understanding, blinking at her instead. With her typical Kirika-like gaze, Kirika then said with some amusement:

"What I mean is, thanks for taking care of me, Yachi. You can't take it back now."

Haruaki exhaled.

"I'm not going to take it back."

"Do know that I am a troublesome woman, with an inferiority complex and prone to jealousy. You'd better prepare yourself."

"...Please go easy on me."

Haruaki smiled wryly with his reply, prompting Kirika to go "oh my" and make a surprised look. Then as though noticing something, she turned her gaze.

"Hmm... I see now. Because it's the second person, that's why you're so calm?"

"Second person? ...Oh."

Haruaki also noticed where Kirika's gaze was directed. It was Konoha, with a haggard look on her face. As though asking about tomorrow's weather, Kirika said in a lively manner:

"So how are things progressing on your end, Konoha-kun?"

"Originally stalled earlier, but a new beginning has started successfully. We are no longer brother and sister."

Konoha shrugged helplessly. Hearing that, Kirika nodded.

"A new beginning huh... I guess it's the same for me too? I originally wanted a courageous sacrifice before running away, but looks like Yachi won't allow it. Since he wants me to struggle face to face, that suits me just fine."

"If only the finish line could come nearer."

"Agreed."

The two girls nodded in understanding for some reason.

"Umm—Although many things have happened, I do hope we can get along like this from now on... W-Would it be agreeable with you two, may I ask?"

Haruaki naturally switched to polite language. The two girls looked at him and replied.

"I just want to tell you this: 'Please feel free to sneak into my bedroom at night!' I welcome your visits any time."

"What!? N-No, m-me too! Umm, if that's what you want, umm, I, too... don't intend to refuse! Although it's absolutely ridiculous!"

The subject of conversation was jumping ahead too rapidly! Haruaki instantly felt the world spin around him and looked around as though searching for help—

"Beauties throwing themselves at you! Possible to take shifts too! I really need to pay even more attention to make sure my camera's fully charged!" Kuroe yelled loudly whereas Kotetsu pouted and watched Konoha grudgingly. Fear's face convulsed while her eyebrows twitched. "Th-That's right, I don't care. I don't care at all. Too easy... Ha, ha, ha." Then she pinched her own elbow hard.

Naturally, it looked like he had no allies to rely on in his life from this point onwards.

Part 3

"...By the way, what happened to Sleif?"

"After Pendragon sent her flying away like a ball, that's the last we saw of her. But she's apparently not human, so she probably survived."

"Hmm... What an absolutely ridiculous miscalculation. If only I realized sooner that she was a humanoid tool then I wouldn't have been caught by her. I only failed to escape because I didn't expect her to be able to chop my leg off barehanded."

"Probably some kind of blade like Konoha and Kotetsu, right?"

"Probably."

Kirika stretched her limbs that had been forced to bend in confinement earlier, breathing fresh air while conversing. Just that was enough to recover her original physical state. She had not suffered any severe injury requiring healing from«Gimestorante's Love» in the first place. Her inability to get up until now was only due to oxygen deprivation—as well as purely mental reasons.

After receiving treatment in both aspects, Kirika slowly stood up with assistance from Haruaki's hands. What a perk. However, the small sense of happiness was instantly destroyed.

"Hi, looks like things are over? How amazing~"

"...Pakuaki."

Her brother and Un Izoey were approaching slowly. She had just heard from the others about the rescue operation they had planned, so all she did for now was glare at him.

"Seeing you safe and sound is more important than anything, Kirika. Wonderful, wonderful."

"..."

"By the way—What are we going to do about the deal?"

Kirika could already answer instantly.

"Unneeded. Something was wrong with my brain earlier."

"Is that so? Well, it is your freedom to choose."

"...I have a question for you, Yamimagari Pakuaki."

"What is it, my dear little sister?"

Kirika poured her entire body's strength into her eyes, in order to see through all lies, in order to see through all deceit, in order to denounce all fraud.

"Asking us to steal that *spear*—What exactly do you want to do with it?"

"Eh? Of course to research it. See what kind of power it has, see what the curse is like, etc."

Pakuaki answered with a face of puzzlement. Kirika narrowed her eyes. She wanted to pursue the matter, she really wanted to pursue the matter—but right now, she could not disclose the specifics here. Suppose Pakuaki really was unaware, then it be equivalent to telling him information. The terrifying objective that Sleif intended to accomplish. Using that *spear's* power—

"...Really? Good."

Kirika exhaled and turned her gaze away, pretending there was nothing significant about the matter.

Apart from that, she was powerless to do anything.

But of course, for Pakuaki, this was not actually an unknown.

(Since I said I won't lie until Kirika was rescued... I guess it's currently fine now?)

Pakuaki simply smiled wryly in his heart.

Naturally, he had not lied either before the gathering. There really existed a method to remove «Gimestorante's Love» without killing her. Suppose she successfully fulfilled the promise, he intended to tell her.

However, that method involved all of the large number of Indulgence Disks existing in a certain place, using them to neutralize the curse. Hence, it was still unknown whether she would be willing to choose this method in practice.

In order to gather the power from each Indulgence Disk and inject it into «Gimestorante's Love», it would also be necessary to build suitable equipment inside the Lab Chief's Nation and perform calibrations. In other words, even if only temporarily, Kirika must return to the Lab Chief's Nation—Pakuaki did not think she would accept that.

(Only possible in theory, but in practice... Not necessarily. Like entering a state of suspended animation during the instant of removal, this seems quite likely to happen. Even if medical resuscitation systems were flawlessly prepared, chances of survival then would probably be fifty-fifty... Hmm, truly a great unknown.)

In order to improve chances, the absolute number of Indulgence Disks must be increased. However, this too was something that was impossible to actualize in practice. *Because in this world, only thirty-two Indulgence Disks existed in the first place.*

The thief Yachi Honatsu had gathered ten-odd Indulgence Disks from all over the world. Another ten-odd disks were already inserted into the cursed cube. *Then there were the remaining few that could not be stolen no matter what.* Although Pakuaki did not know whether it was one or two remaining, in any case, he speculated that this was the total inventory.

Hence, increasing numbers was not possible. As for how to extract Indulgence Disks from within the cursed cube, this was an unknown, whether to herself, to those of the Yachi house, or to him. Surely it was only known to one person. And

the last remaining Indulgence Disk was most likely in the most difficult place in the world to obtain—

(Although both sides are similar.)

Pakauki could only snicker in his heart. Then he changed his thoughts.

No matter what, contemplating these hypotheticals would not help. Currently, there were more practical matters that needed to be prioritized.

Pretending to turn his head unintentionally, Pakauaki scanned the area. *That thing* was apparently out of view.

He sighed "oh dear."

What a miscalculation. Despite giving himself the most probable spot on the map for Sleif to appear and assigning Haruaki's group with the second likely location, who could have predicted Sleif would appear at the second location instead? Reversing the order at the time was not lying. It was out of benevolence, wanting to take on the hardship of battle. Those were the calculations going through Pakuaki's mind.

(In any case—Some of the calculations deviated. Although it matters not to me whether Kirika still wants to continue the deal, but I really cannot give up on that *spear* so easily...)

In contrast to his true feelings, Pakuaki suddenly relaxed his face.

Then as inconspicuously as possible, nonchalantly, he—

"Uh... Then what happened to the spear in her possession? Just as I say to Kirika, I'm quite interested and would like to research it if possible. Is it still with the knight?"

"Oh~? No, I remember it flying towards the sea."

Pendragon absentmindedly motioned with his chin in the sea's direction then said as though he remembered something:

"Oh right, I think I saw Squishy-ko and Fourteen rush down to search for it just now. Because our teachings say: Your own Wathes are yours, while the Wathes of defeated enemies are also yours. Hey~ How's the search going~?"

Pendragon yelled down the cliff beside him. Although out of sight, Satsuko and Fourteen's voices came back. Satsuko's voice was still timid while the house that loved to clean and tidy replied in a gruff voice.

"Ehhhhhhhhh, it turns out that it really is hard for someone so weak like Satsuko to even find a fallen spear~? Can't find it~ ...It almost seems like a voice is saying: 'Using those blind eyes of yours, you'll never find it no matter what! Whether the spear or the truth of this world!' Sob sob sob sob."

"This rocky area... Too messy. Seaweed. Empty cans. Plastic bags. Ugh! I so want to clean it up..."

At this moment, someone tugged Haruaki's sleeve, prompting him to look back and see Kirika bringing her face close to whisper:

"Yachi, that *spear* is very dangerous. It must be destroyed. Don't hand it over to anyone."

Because Kirika's tone of voice was too serious, Haruaki also lowered his voice to a whisper in return:

"Why?"

Kirika frowned then made a hesitant look before saying:

"...Even explaining it would be very inauspicious. All I can say is that it must absolutely be destroyed."

Since Kirika insisted so resolutely, Haruaki believed it must be the irrefutable truth. However, Satsuko and Fourteen had already started the search.

"So you mean we must find it before them? What if they found it first...?"

"Then negotiate with them to obtain that *spear*—Otherwise..."

Then there was no choice but to fight.

Kirika's eyes were telling him with no uncertainty at all. Haruaki could fully feel she was serious.

Next to them, Fear also seemed to have overheard their conversation.

"I don't quite get it, but since you're saying it like this, it must be true."

"Yes. We must find it first and destroy it."

"Since Muramasa-sama has said so."

"I will do my best too~ Although it's a pain after getting saltwater on hair, I have to redeem my honor now after my super finishing move failed!"

At this moment, looking towards the sea with a smile, Pakuaki raised his hand immediately and said:

"Looks like it's a lot of work. Then we must help out as well... Un Izoey, I'm counting on you. If you find it first, I'll reward you with 10%."

"My question: what kind of unknown is 10% reward of an object?"

"Naturally, it's the prioritized right to conduct research. But I guess you'll have to wait until we've investigated all unknowns before returning it back to you."

"...So normally speaking, this is what they call highway robbery?"

Un Izoey sighed then took a light leap over the asphalt. Naturally, no sound could be heard from her landing on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

"Guh! Everyone is operating on the silent understanding of early bird gets the worm? We have to hurry!"

Fear rushed forward in the forefront while the rest of Haruaki's group followed closely in haste. Haruaki was still hoping for Kirika to continue resting, but judging from the vibe she was giving, that would be an absolutely unacceptable suggestion.

Kirika's eyes were very serious. Completely unconcerned that her bondage suit was exposed in view, she looked for the spear. Haruaki could not help but feel quite unbelievable.

To make her so serious in wanting to destroy that spear—

What kind of power did it actually possess?

But in the end, after spending a lot of time searching, the spear still could not be found.

Towards the end, Fourteen started examining the seabed ahead of the rocky area using her ability to walk underwater. Seeing that, Un Izoey muttered "I'm an expert at catching *sukunaki* too, I can't lose" while jumping into the sea competitively. Unable to simply sit on the sidelines watching, Konoha sighed and leaped into the sea. "I-If Muramasa-sama jumps in—!" Kotetsu followed in resignation. Kuroe also searched the seabed with her hair. Hence in terms of numbers, Haruaki's side had the advantage, however—the spear still could not be found.

Sundown came and the whole area was virtually shrouded in the darkness of night. They began to use the process of elimination to reach a conclusion at the scene.

"After searching for so long, if it still can't be found..."

"The only possibility left is that it got washed somewhere far out. That spear looked like it was made of wood, so it's very possible."

"Hmm, I used my hair to search quite a broad range too. I can't possibly have missed it if it sank to the seabed. It's also impossible for both the diving expert and the underwater walking expert to have missed it."

Haruaki glanced at Kirika. She was gazing at the dark sea with concentration.

"—Yeah. I hope that's true."

Although still unsatisfied, she seemed to relax for now. After exhaling lightly, Kirika turned around and started walking after finding a path through the rocky area to return to the place on the road where they were earlier. Along the way, Pakuaki remarked with a face of disappointment: "Oh my oh my, I really wanted it." Totally drenched, Un Izoey replied: "I am truly sorry." The two of them also converged with Kirika. Naturally, Kirika neither looked at him nor spoke to him.

"Hawwwwwww, couldn't find it after all... Weak little Satsuko doesn't even have good luck."

"I want to sunbathe tomorrow. I want to dry every part of my body thoroughly...!"

Next, the depressed Satsuko with slumped shoulders and the silently fuming Fourteen also walked in the same direction back to the road.

Keeping some distance from the various factions, Haruaki's group advanced in a line. Fear suddenly spoke up:

"Oh right, I was thinking Sleif would come back after so much time passed, but she didn't appear."

"Perhaps her injuries were too severe? After all, she was sent flying so far away."

"Even if she returned... Hmm, if the spear was washed away by the sea, she won't be able to find it."

"I hope so."

Haruaki could still see worry from the side of Kirika's face. At this moment, he recalled something.

"By the way, Class Rep, what happened to the «Tragic Black River»?"

"Now that you mention it... She stole it when capturing me, I still haven't gotten it back."

Kirika raised her right arm and murmured as though going "I only remembered now that you mention it." However, she then exhaled and smiled:

"Nevertheless—anyway, it doesn't matter if it's gone."

"But you wouldn't give it to me when I asked you once."

"Th-The situation now... is quite different from back then. Absolutely ridiculous. But it does feel a bit unsettling to not have anything for self-defense. I'll just have to look through the storeroom at your house and see if there's anything suitable."

"I won't agree to anything whose curse is too strong..."

In any case, with that belt gone, Kirika would not need to be tormented by the curse compelling her to strangle others to death—which her only method to achieve was by self-abuse. This was probably the only thing worth celebrating. Then all that was left was for her bondage suit's curse to be gradually dispelled as long as she lived at that house. The ground's powers of purification ought to slowly erase her curse, bit by bit.

A staircase built on the cliff came into view. Near the railing above, the superintendent and Honatsu could be seen. They probably came to check out the situation. Pendragon and his companions were also standing on the side.

Leaning against the railing, Pendragon looked out at sea.

He looked neither bored, nor happy, nor displeased.

For some reason, his gaze—

Like telling of a new continent that must be visited, hidden beyond the far end of the ocean, shrouded in darkness, like staring intently as though to avoid missing a flash of light...

—Was filled with inexplicable solemnity.

Part 4

Late that night...

Kirika could not possibly start living in the Yachi home immediately after all. Hence, she returned home after saying she would start packing her luggage. Probably due to using her super finishing move, Kuroe looked quite exhausted, apparently holing up in her room to sleep as soon as she finished taking a bath. Due to too many things happening today, Konoha, Kotetsu and Honatsu were probably asleep already.

—Hence, there was no one in the way.

Gulping, Fear looked at Haruaki whom she had called to her room.

Nervously, he was staring at her naked body—although in its cube form.

"I-Is this really okay? Fear..."

"Yeah, it's okay."

She had made her decision.

She recalled Haruaki's large-looking back when they were on the dueling ship.

"You have definitely... gained new power. Using the term that popped up at the time—That's the power related to 'Yachi House,' everyone's power."

"Fear..."

"I believe that power should be worth trusting in. At least I think so... There's no longer any need for me to charge and attack this way and that, thinking I need to protect everything by my own hands."

Her tone of voice suddenly grew gentle, because she realized it. No matter what was said verbally, this was without a doubt—

"...How willful of me. Although the power I can lend you will decrease, you can probably borrow from other places... In other words, asking to be spoiled... No, perhaps this can be called slacking off."

"Haha."

At this moment, Haruaki suddenly relaxed his expression then closed his eyes. Patting his drawn up knees, he puffed out his chest in an exaggerated manner.

"The lesson I learned this time is that you should speak out when it's the right moment for being willful!"

Opening one eye, he continued in a joking tone of voice:

"This is what Pops taught me, so if you want to complain, don't come to me, complain to him."

"Oh... That's right. Which is why I'm going to make a willful deamnd. However, this is ultimately your decision too. All you need to do is say 'no' and everything will be over. How's that?"

"I'm not going to say no."

"This is your birthday present from Honatsu."

"In that case, how I use it is my freedom, right?"

Fear exhaled. She felt happy that her willfulness was approved but it also troubled her.

However, she was already past the point of no return.

"In this form, I have neither arms nor fingers. In order to make this me, unable to do anything by myself, become even more powerless—I need your strength. I need your will."

Hence—after she quietly added these words...

She stared straight at him using the cube's eyes.

"Give me... Your birthday present. Using your will, insert it into my body."

He scratched his face in embarrassment.

"...How many in total?"

"Sixteen. Some of my slots were sealed to begin with, so this will leave one remaining."

"That's really quite a lot. I might not manage to be very gentle."

"Just put them in at your own pace. By this point, I'm not going to complain anymore..."

With only one opening left, it felt frustrating to be just short of completion, but thinking about it from a different perspective, it meant that she did not lose all combat ability irrevocably. Perhaps there was no need to overthink this.

Having clearly committed her resolve and determination, it ended up with Haruaki being the indecisive one, making her feel even more embarrassed.

Fear inhaled and said:

"Hey... Don't hurry too much... Come over... You should also... get started...?"

Haruaki instantly groaned "guh" then leaned back.

He was blushing to his ears. Finally, as though steeling his resolve, he said:

"I-I know. I've prepared myself too so I'm sticking with you to the end!"

Her private part was filling up through his action.

"Mmm... Ah! ...Ah, ahhh, fuah..."

"D-Don't keep making weird noises! But I've been curious for a long time now, how does this feel...?"

Tight, slightly painful, leaving her breathless.

However, it was actually very pleasurable.

This was surely because you were the one doing it.

Her private part was filling up through his action.

"Hmm~ I should have improved a little, right?"

"The first time... Mmm! You were really... clumsy, y'know...?"

"What about now?"

"Hee, mmm ahhhhhh! N-No comment..."

As though having fun, he wiggled a half-inserted Indulgence Disk to stimulate her.

But the true answer had surely leaked already.

Her private part was filling up through his action.

"Thinking back carefully now, we've done this so many times already... It feels kind of nostalgic."

"Haa... I-I don't find it nostalgic at all, already forgotten."

Liar. She remembered many things.

His clumsy movements in the very beginning.

That day when his lips touched her.

This act, happening after sad incidents, after happy incidents.

Abundant memories.

Her private part was filling up through his action.

"Oh! ...Hee, mmm!"

"S-Sorry, my hand slipped!"

His slipping hand touched her crack, his fingernails brushing past the opening.

It felt like an electric current was passing through her entire body.

Ahhh. She should admit it.

Even without the Indulgence Disks, surely she longed for these hands.

She hoped for Haruaki to touch her most important spot.

Then following—

Her private part was filling up through his action.

Her private part was filling up through his action.

Her private part was filling up through his action—

"Ah, ah—!"

At the very end, she could not even think anymore.

Simply staring into Haruaki's face the whole time—

Making lame noises from the depths of her throat continuously.

...Then by the time she regained her senses, all the Indulgence Disks had been inserted into her body already.

"Huff... Huff... Huff..."

"It's over, good work... You tried very hard."

She could hear the sound of her own panting. She could feel Haruaki's hands assembling the parts and closing up her body. He was already used to this task. After cleaning up the aftermath rapidly, he turned his back to her in slight embarrassment.

"Okay, then I'll—"

"Don't you want to hear... my reactions?"

She interrupted him. Haruaki jumped in surprise.

"R-Reactions? Uh~ Well, what's the... feeling?"

"...Very painful. Also, very scary."

"Fear..."

She could sense some nervousness from the sight of Haruaki's back. He probably noticed the trembling and tearfulness in her voice.

She was speaking the truth.

Both painful and scary.

Hence—

"...I want after-sales service."

"Uwawah?"

She turned back into human form.

Hugging Haruaki's body from behind...

She pushed him down.

"H-Hey! Fear!"

Due to Haruaki's struggling, when the two of them hit the floor, their bodies were facing each other. However, she could not see his face. She was hugging him forcefully, tightly, tightly embracing him, burying her face into his neck, which was why she could not see his face.

Until just now, she had still been in cube form, so naturally, she was currently nude. Haruaki's body warmth was transmitting directly to her naked skin. Her entire body was feeling Haruaki's warmth.

"Seriously... painful and scary too. So... You must take responsibility... Make me feel better again..."

She exerted more force through the arms embracing him, shifting her center of gravity to her chest that was pressed against his body, pushing her nose hard against his neck.

Haruaki's... taste.

For some reason, she could not hold herself back any longer.

"Ah, ahhh...?"

Sticking out her tongue, she licked his neck. Haruaki made a very lame sound. She found it very cute and her heart filled with tender affection. Then feeling that licking was not enough, she bared her teeth slightly and tried to bite him gently. Haruaki's body shuddered intensely as a result.

"Wha... Fear, hey, what are you doing...?"

She—

What was she doing?

What did she want to do?

These questions directed at herself were merely for confirmation, not out of confusion.

She had no intention to stop.

"I... am neither like Kirika... who's so smart."

"Huh?"

"Nor like Cow Tits... having lived in this world for a very long time... I'm surely... just a child."

Thoughts from the bottom of her heart surged out.

She noticed. After discovering Kirika's feelings and listening to Konoha's confession, she noticed.

Long before that, always, always existing in her heart the whole time, those feelings.

However, only after embracing him like this was she firmly convinced that this fact must be conveyed through words—

"That's why I don't understand those complicated things... But I only look forward to the future."

She pushed herself up slightly...

...Shifting her face away from his neck.

She met gazes with Haruaki under her.



"I want this to go on forever."

"Ah..."

"Even losing all my power, I still want to stay like this with you forever."

Skin to skin. Body warmth in contact. Smelling his odor. Sensing his flavor.
Hearing his voice.

Staying with him—by his side.

"That's my only wish. I want to do this. It feels very unsettling after losing my power, but also very happy—right now I am infinitely close to the wish of my ideal, this is it. So, to prevent you from forgetting, I have to tell you first."

"Tell me... what...?"

"A sentence to stop you from forgetting, words that will always, always bind you. Linger in your heart, my very private reason. Yeah, that's right, in other words, this is—"

She narrowed her eyes and declared:

"—to you who cannot be cursed, this is the one and only curse I can give you."

She could feel Haruaki holding his breath under her.

"Listen carefully, Haruaki. Don't forget..."

She said in almost a whisper.

At the same time, she slowly moved her face down.

"M-Me too, actually no less than those other girls, towards you, I really—"

Then she delivered the remainder of her words into his mouth directly.

Part 5

Waking up in her room the following morning...

The first thing Fear did was use her Rubik's cube to check her own condition.

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»..."

The emulated cube on the floor transformed while making tiny metallic impact noises. The drill that could not be more familiar. An object comprising a hard and solid handle with a rotatable spiral blade. A torture tool for gouging human flesh.

This was the only past self of hers remaining now.

"Hmm..."

She gripped the handle and tried swinging the tool, taking care not to carve a hole in the sliding door. The same weight as always. The same tactile sensation as always. This made her breathe a sigh of relief somewhat.

«A Hatchet of Lingchi», «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes», «Morgenstern» and all others... Although it was no longer possible to transform into other tools of torture and execution... Although it was no longer possible to make the emulated cube display those forms either—

She believed it was fine to have just the drill. It could be used for thrusting, swinging, throwing. Hence, there was no problem at all. Even if any problem arose in the future, there would always be a solution. What if there was no solution? As long as she asked Haruaki and the others for help, they would try their best to solve the problem. That was good enough.

Turning the «Human-Perforator» back into the Rubik's cube, Fear tried to stand up from her sitting posture on the tatami floor with calves bent against her outer thighs. However—

"Ugh, so painful..."

A certain part of her body was hurting. Stinging numbly. It was due to Haruaki's behavior the previous night.

"Seriously, damn Haruaki... He clearly could have been more gentle..."

She grumbled with cheeks slightly reddened and pouting lips. However, she felt that this pain was like proof of her courage. Although embarrassed, she did not feel ashamed. Puffing out her chest forcefully as though cheering for herself, she walked out of the room.

The living room was already filled with lively chatting as well as the lovely aroma of miso soup.

"Oh~ Good morning, Ficchi. I was just thinking whether I should go wake up you."

"Umuu, good morning."

Not only Kuroe but everyone was here already. Konoha, Kotetsu, Honatsu, as well as—

"G-Good morning, Fear..."

"Y-Yeah."

She made eye contact with Haruaki who was currently placing breakfast plates on the table. Her heart inexplicably started to beat fast. Haruaki also blushed and froze.

"Hmm...? What is going on between you two? Your attitudes are weird... you know?"

Seeing Konoha frowning with a puzzled look, Fear was brought back to reality.

"N-Nothing much, just the same as usual, yeah."

After what had happened last night, it felt even more embarrassing. Whether conversing or looking at each other—Everything was making her heart pound with a feeling of exhilaration.

Extreme happiness.

"Muu...?"

"Hmm? What is going on? Somehow, the atmosphere feels not quite the same."

Konoha and the others threw gazes of suspicion, but of course, what happened the night before was a secret between the two of them... At least at the current stage.

In order to hide things, Fear took her eyes off Haruaki.

"Anyway! What's for breakfast today? I'm starving!"

"Oh... Right, today's eggs were fried using the frying pan Fear gave me as a gift. That pan really is great to use."

"Very good, umuu. Continue to use that pan from now on and cook delicious~ things for me to eat. Let me eat to my heart's content! That's why I gave it to you as a present, this is an order!"

After speaking extremely rapidly, Fear sat herself down hard on her seat cushion. After looking at the dishes arranged neatly over the dining table, she could not help but relax her face.

Somehow, she felt that certain things were operating completely differently starting from today. A new frying pan. A new her. Days slightly more wonderful than yesterday were waiting ahead of her. She had this feeling.

However, just at this moment—

A cellphone rang loudly from Haruaki's pocket.

"I've never seen this number before... Who could it be? Hello?"

After Haruaki picked up the call, his face instantly froze.

Then after a period of time when it seemed like the other side was explaining certain things on their own—

"Ah, wait...!"

Just as Haruaki frantically tried to speak, the other side hung up apparently. Haruaki immediately took the phone off his ear.

"Hey, who called...?"

"It's Pendragon."

Still with surprised and troubled expression, Haruaki repeated the exact words that had passed through his ear.

"I found the spear. You guys come over and pick it up."

Part 6

Haruaki and company made another unreasonable demand forcibly, asking the superintendent to mobilize his cabin cruiser again. The operator was still Zenon while Ganon was apparently rolling around at home today due to her usual disease of laziness. By the way, although Haruaki's group had no right to say anything either, was it okay for her to be absent from work, being the school physician and all?

Sitting on the cruiser making its way over the sea, Fear tilted her head.

"They most likely found the spear which happened to drift along a sea current, but didn't Satsuko and Fourteen want it too? Wouldn't they give it to their own side?"

"It's possible that the spear is not powerful as a weapon."

"Truth be told, that is very logical."

Even though it was a sudden notification, Kirika also hurried over. She nodded and said:

"Yes, that possibility exists. Because Sleif never took it out to use as a weapon."

However, Kirika did not show any signs of relief on her face. While gazing at the gradually approaching fleet, with an expression akin to praying, she whispered: "...It'd be great if they are still unaware of that. I hope things could end peacefully..."

"By the way~ How much does this cruiser cost? ...Oh~? Wow—Oh my! You definitely must have had underhanded dealings? Otherwise, how could you possibly buy something like this so easily!?"

"Honatsu-san, please give me a break. I do take a lot of pride in the fact that I am a respectable businessman."

"On the other hand, I don't really think respectable businessmen wear that kind of mask."

"Yeah yeah! In order to show off how respectable you are, I believe we must hold a beer party over the sea in this cruiser next time! Then catch some fresh fish to cook on the spot~"

"Nice idea! Let's eat sea bream and flounder live, odorigui style!"

Honatsu, Kuroe and the superintendent were chatting back and forth in leisure. No sense of tension—Haruaki sighed with a wry smile. That being said, a party on a boat did sound like a very fun idea.

Amidst the noise and bustle, the cabin cruiser reached the Draconians' stronghold. Like last time, they boarded the Dueling Ship Leviathan.

However, unlike last time, there were no tables or chairs set up on the vast deck.

There was only Pendragaon with Riko clinging to his back and Granaury standing still with eyes closed.

"Oh, you guys came."

"We're here. I heard you found the spear?"

Pendragon scratched his cheek in response to Fear's question.

Then he simply said:

"Oh sorry, that was a lie."

"Wha—?"

Fear stared wide-eyed, making a strange cry.

In contrast, Pendragon's face was very calm.

"Becuase I've found something I must obtain at all costs. Sorry, become mine."

His face was serious with a solemn expression.

Considering the content of his words, with sincerity almost like a marriage proposal—He stared at her.

"...Huh? Me?"

Namely, *Kuroe*.

"Max, hold on a sec. Isn't this too sudden of you? I hope you'll explain yourself."

"Explain? I think you can figure it out easily."

Hearing the superintendent, Pendragon exhaled.

"When that girl was fighting Sleif, she used an interesting move."

"Hmm~? You mean «Kingdom Kiyomori»?"

"Is that the name? The one injecting life force into your body using your hair, thereby amplifying your strength so much that it made you almost like a different person."

"...Indeed, she did use that move. Max, are you thinking of using that to increase your power?"

"No, that's not the principle here... But perhaps it's worth a thought if it's doable. The issue here is that she has powers of control which allow that to be possible. Qi, energy, life force, vitality, soul—Call it whatever you want, but anyway, she has the skills to manipulate these powers."

"What are you talking about!? And what does that have to do with you!?"

"Because I am who I am. You guys seem to have forgotten, but I am the Draconians' Number One. Seeking strength, hoping to become stronger than anyone. Right now, what occupies my mind is the only weakness in the man who used to be the strongest. And I cannot escape that weakness. If that weakness could be overcome, I should be able to truly become the strongest. To become a dragon. That's what I've always thought. Every day of my life was spent in search for this answer—"

Listening to this point, the superintendent shook his head with an alarmed realization.

"Used to be the strongest—You mean the previous Commander... Long?"

"That's right. Gabriel, I've said this before, haven't I? You know too why I could win, right?"

Haruaki had heard it mentioned as well.

Inside that villa, Pendragon had chatted about the past with the superintendent's group.

The reason why he was able to prevail against the extremely powerful former Commander who was almost impossible to defeat—

"—'Old age' huh?"

Haruaki could not help but whisper. Pendragon threw a glance at him.

"That's right. Hence, I have carved it upon my heart. This is a dragon's natural enemy. Dragons are not supposed to grow old."

"What!? In other words—?"

Hearing Fear's groan, Pendragon nodded and continued:

"As long as I have that girl's power, in other words, the power to manipulate life force, perhaps *old age* can be prevented."

"Wait... That's absolutely ridiculous. What about Fourteen? She also said her curse causes eternal youth!"

"That's only freezing the owner's outer appearance. It's kind of like the simulated anti-aging of cosmetic surgery. Squishy-ko's looks might remain unchanged for the next few decades but her internal health is probably a different matter. She'll probably age and die like a normal person."

Even after listening to the rebuttal from Kirika and her outstanding memory, Pendragon still remained unrelenting.

"What I seek is a body that knows no aging. The pinnacle of strength that remains unchanged as the pinnacle of strength forever. Now that would be true 'eternal youth'—For this purpose, I believe that I need you, Ningyohara Kuroe. Aging is a flaw. I need to be able to overcome this flaw and that means I need you, who can replenish brand-new vitality any time."

Kuroe stared back at Pendragon's forceful gaze and exhaled.

"Basically, I'd like to ask just in case. What if I refused—?"

"I won't allow you to refuse. You are the only thing I lack, so I will do everything I can to make you mine."

"H-Hold on! Why, how, clearly you've shown no signs of wanting to fight us all along—"

"You must be mistaken. I am who I am. I'm missing the last piece of the puzzle and the only thing left to do is find the puzzle piece that fills the gap. Of course, things that don't fit are immediately obvious, it's possible to see at a glance that something is useless to me and I don't need to plunder greedily everywhere—But as soon as I see something whose shape seems to match perfectly, the situation becomes entirely different, right?"

"...Truly what a shame. When chatting here last time, I as thinking we could maintain this agreeable relationship."

Honatsu spoke in a lively tone of voice, but his gaze was very grim.

Pendragon grinned, showing his teeth.

"Sorry, what a short alliance it was, 'Yachi House.' But you guys probably know—"

Like a savage beast...

He bared his devouring fangs and said:

"I am the type of animal that kills everyone in anger when roused from slumber in its lair, the strongest beast in the world, the most used to having its own way in the world—the *dragon*. And I'm its head to boot. How could I possibly not be capricious?"

Part 7

Fear's heart was pounding madly.

Why? Why did things turn out like this? Why?

With a trembling hand, she gripped the Rubik's cube. Her emulated form, with her last power remaining.

"All-out? Do I need to go all-out~?"

"Yes, I'm counting on you, Riko."

"Heh... Hehn. Jeez, since you asked me for a favor, there's no helping it! Okay, I'll hug you tight! Let's go, Maximilian!"

While clinging on his back, Riko wrapped her arms around his neck, embracing him tightly—

In the next second, her body vanished suddenly without a trace. Taking her place was—

"«Corpse Armor Rikongarowa»... That's this girl's true name."

Pendragon was clad in a set of milky-white armor. The armor was neither western nor Japanese in style. Although it was indeed full body armor covering the entire body except for the head, it gave off an impression of trendiness and elegance. Every piece seemed quite beautiful in design. Structurally, it imitated the scales of living organisms instead of prioritizing straight lines—Purely based on impressions, the armor was almost akin to scales.

However, there were very few identical components. Even their sizes were very varied. Many scale-like masses of white solid armor were combined together to form components, covering the entire the body. The most striking fact was that every piece of armor was moving.

As though searching for the best shape to serve as armor, as though making its own judgment calls on what parts needed overlapping layers for protection and where armor should be reduced for ease of movement, the armor was writhing irregularly like a living creature yet retaining an overall shape as armor.

"Cursed armor...!?"

"Precisely! Muramasa-sama, defense power goes without saying, but she can also enhance physical power. Please be careful!"

Kotetsu entered a combat stance while speaking. Weighed down by nervousness and wariness, his expression was very stiff. This was probably he knew the enemy's ability level better than anyone. Namely, that of the Draconians.

"Should I enter the stage as well? Master?"

"It's not very fair for Riko to be the only one working, right? This is an order... Move out."

"How nostalgic, being subjected to tyrannical orders unilaterally like getting stabbed in the throat. How it truly stirs up revulsion/excitement from the bottom of my heart."

Eyes closed, standing by on the side, Granaury took a leap. Instantly, her appearance—

Changed into some kind of *double-edged blade*, appearing in Pendragon's right hand. Fear could only describe as some kind of double-edged blade. It was a thick blade with a sharp front tip. A knife? No—

"The spear upholding righteousness and loyalty, the «Granaury Spear», also known as the «Contradictory Spear Granaury»... I really don't want to see you in that form again."

Another person, the superintendent who was also familiar with the Draconians, spoke quietly.

"It looks quite different from what you know from before, all thanks to Riko."

"Hmph! I accommodate it as usual because I've no choice!"

The right arm portion of Pendragon's armor shifted noisily. After taking in the blade transformed from Granaury, it stabilized and remained fixed. Or rather, it should be described as merged. In terms of results, it looked like a blade extending forward from the back of the hand.

"Very well—Let's go. Do put in everything you've got. Unless you want to die!"

Hence, Pendragon sprang into action without engaging in more useless talk.

Finally, it was time for action.

Fear watched Konoha turn into a Japanese sword, held in Haruaki's hand. She saw Kotetsu charge forward as though casting hesitation aside. She saw Kuroe extend her hair. She saw Zenon retreating while protecting the superintendent. She saw Kirika extend her right arm where the «Tragic Black River» was missing before clicking her tongue.

(H-Hold on...)

Fear reflexively turned the Rubik's cube into the «Human-Perforator». Her only remaining... power.

Only this type of power was left.

"Ooh, ah, ahhhhhhhhhh!"

Fear intentionally made her mind blank then charged fiercely.

Then—

By the time she came back to her senses, Fear was collapsed on the floor.

All sense of time was lost. Pain coursed through her entire body. It felt as though an overwhelming storm had trampled her indiscriminantly. It felt a bit like exhaustion. Her body complained of fatigue while her vision flickered. Her shoulder was buried into the deck. Kotetsu, collapsed on the floor, entered her view. Kirika had died. Back against the ship's edge, Zenon was limp and unmoving. Was the superintendent okay? He was not in sight. What about Kuroe? What about Haruaki?

Feeling something solid in her palm, all she could do was grip it tightly.

(Why—at this time of all times—)

She had always believed all she needed was this drill in her hand. Having this alone was enough to fight.

But only against this guy, only against Pendragon...

Simply being able to fight was totally not enough.

She understood the most fundamental fact.

(Why—)

Why did she seal up her power? Why did she believe this would be fine?

Right now, in front of Pendragon, only the injured Haruaki was standing—

Inside her blurry view, that despairing scene was easily shrouded by an even more despairing feeling.

"Ooh, ahhhh!?"

The Japanese sword was grabbed by Pendragon's armored hand.

Together with Haruaki holding it, the sword was raised into the air.

"Haru!"

"Don't... come over, Kuroe! ...You stay back...!"

Behind Haruaki was Kuroe whom he had apparently been protecting all this time. Kuroe wanted to extend her hair to fight back like a caged beast, but looked really weak. It seemed like no matter what she did, she would be powerless to stop what Pendragon was about to do to Haruaki—

(Stop... it...!)

Fear's breathing stopped. Her heart stopped.

Instinctively, she launched the «Human-Perforator» from her hand. However, Pendragon simply raised his left arm and swung, deflecting the drill before throwing a bored glance at her. Using the chain of cubes to pull the drill back, Fear fished out a second Rubik's cube, guided by her trembling spine. Another «Human-Perforator». But what could she do while holding these?

Feeling lost, she halted her movements.

Pendragon scoffed then turned his face forward. Instantly—

"Kah—ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Konoha seized this opportunity to draw out her blade, thus leaving Pendragon to hold just the black scabbard. She hastily controlled Haruaki's now freed body, raising the blade for a slice—very likely, for just that one instant, for the sake of Haruaki's personal safety, she cast aside all taboo.

Even so—

"Hah."

"!"

Pendragon swiftly tossed the scabbard away and blocked Konoha's blade using the back of his hand before grabbing the body of her blade again, suspending Haruaki in midair. This time—There was no escape.

"Although I bear you no grudge, this is for my goal. Don't hate me."

Then Pendragon drew his left arm back like drawing a bow.

A crack tore open in the depths of Fear's heart.

(No good.)

Haruaki, Haruaki.

She must save him. She must find a way.

She needed power. Right now, only power was everything. She needed the power to save Haruaki.

Simply using this one drill—No, that was wrong. Even if left with just one drill was fine. If things could not be changed, there was no helping it.

Oh right—Even so, all she needed was the power to defeat that guy.

Even if that cursed...

She thought: I don't care.

"Ahhh—Ahhhhhhh—Ahh!"

Awaken, myself. You're there, right?

That self of hers, filled with cursed power no less than anyone else's.

Knowing cruelty, abuse, sadism, masochism, pain, joy, excitement, climax, depravity, screaming, blood, flesh, bones, tears, death, life, bodily fluids, despair, sorrow, wailing, taboo, how to hurt people, how to kill people, how to destroy people, how to torment people, how to drive people insane, better than anyone, better than anything, that self of hers.

Right now, there was no choice but to rely on her.

This was the one and only way in order to not lose him.

Hence, hence, hence—

Please.

You must...

You must—

"Ah—ah, ah... Ha, ha, ha, ahahahaha, hahah..."

Thus, Fear allowed that familiar darkness to occupy her heart.

Faced with that sense of coldness, she felt her emotions calm down unbelievably—

At the same time, she lost consciousness completely.

Part 8

—Then when she opened her eyes again...

She was lying sideways on the superintendent's cabin cruiser, totally drenched, holding a Rubik's cube in each hand.

There was a faint, weird smell.

She sat up to find an unbelievable scene reflected in the corner of her eye.

Unbelievably, that Dueling Ship Leviathan had split into two from its very center—It was gradually sinking. Although Fear had no idea who had *done that* and how, more than likely, it was because the ship was about to sink that she ended up totally drenched. And because everyone's foothold was destroyed, they managed barely to escape from that place. After all, she was not optimistic enough to think that they were able to defeat Pendragon.

She pulled her gaze back from the sea to the cabin cruiser.

Then she discovered the weird smell's true identity.

"Eh...?"

For an instant, she could not comprehend the situation before her eyes.

All the people supposed to be here were present. However—

Haruaki's eyes were shut, his entire body limp and unmoving. Like her, his was also drenched completely. Turned back into human form, Konoha was hugging him tightly as though warming his body—

Furthermore, Konoha was glaring in her direction with a horrifying gaze with true killing intent.

Because her gaze was truly too direct—

Fear instantly realized who had *done that*.

The smell's true identity—Its source was the familiar odor of blood.

"Ah..."

Throb. Her heart contracted forcefully. Time stopped there and her heart stopped.

His injured body. Countless marks of red on his skin and flesh. The filthy and tattered clothing was akin to rags. Lying down as though sleeping, his sense of presence was so faint that one doubted if he truly existed. Ahhh, then, then—

As though as an act of escapism, Fear recalled memories that were not supposed to be remembered at this time. Her wish. Her desire. Always staying by his side. Using her gift of a frying pan to cook delicious food for her to eat.

This wish... Would it really come true?

Would he be able to use the frying pan she gave him as a present?

Ahead of her gaze, where she was staring—

The fingers on Haruaki's left hand—

Were fewer than the original, rightful number.

Who did it?

The answer was told by the gazes of everyone present, not just Konoha's.

"Ah... Ahhhh...!"

Then after understanding everything, Fear—

For the very first time in her life, she cried her heart out like a child.

Epilogue

Part 1

In the end, speaking the truth after everything was over had become his usual habit. The unknown of what was to come versus the unknown of what had already ended. As for deciding which unknown was more interesting, that required no thought at all.

The usual Lab Chief's room. Sitting on a chair, he was childishly shaking the back of the chair, looking up at the ceiling while he muttered:

"Sigh~ I really wanted that spear... However, nothing can be done by this point. I ought to think about what to do for the next step."

"My question: inquiry about the unknown of what is the spear in the end."

Un Izoey tried asking straight to the point.

He waved his hand while answering in a lively tone of voice at the same time:

"It's something that can slightly improve the standing of our Lab Chief's Nation. Since we're called the Lab Chief's Nation, I was thinking to myself, we really ought to have a certain *something of that sort~*"

"...Something of that sort?"

He shook the chair again with a squeak.

Then straightening his back, with a faint smile, he looked down towards her and said:

"National territory."

Part 2

And right now, that spear—

Had returned to the hands of its original owner.

"Come. Well then, the deal is now done!"

After receiving the rapier from Sleif's hand—«Karma Speed»—Ontenzaki Satsuko answered with all smiles while cradling it in her bosom like a treasure.

Meanwhile, Sleif was staring intently at the spear that Satsuko had handed over to her, confirming again whether it was the real thing. Before relinquishing «Karma Speed», she had also checked it many times already.

What a careful person~ Satsuko smiled wryly while cocking her little head. It was the authentic article. The first to descend to the rocky area, she had found the spear and hidden the real thing inside Fourteen's body before anyone could say anything.

The entire string of actions was as fast as lightning.

This had been Satsuko's target all along—probably starting from the time when they were holding sparring matches at Nirushaaki's place. The foremost principle guiding her actions currently.

Because she believed that this would help in "finding a weapon suitable for herself."

Fourteen was an irreplaceable partner, but because she was a *cursed house*, it was impossible for her to be wielded to attempt different ways of fighting. Since they

had to become strong together, she must also attain an existence worthy of standing as equals. For this, she needed a weapon meeting minimum standards.

Unfortunately, the spear itself could not be used as a weapon. Prepared for probable rejection, Satsuko offered a deal to Sleif who was looking for the spear but unbelievably, she agreed. Satsuko felt truly fortunate.

Because from the first moment she laid her eyes on it, Satsuko was already deeply enamored with this «Karma Speed».

Because she believed that this tool was perfectly suited to her excessively weak and powerless self.

Satsuko laughed "ehehe" again.

"Thank you~ Although someone like Satsuko has no right to ask, is this really okay?"

"Because this spear is the one thing I absolutely cannot let go. No matter what price I must pay, I cannot lose it. Because this is something I *borrowed* from my lord."

Sleif murmured quietly then instantly turned around.

"However, make no mistake, there is still no change at all between my stance and the stance of you two, ugly enough to induce vomiting. Cursed house... One day, I shall surely destroy you too."

"I won't be taken out so easily. When the time comes, you should prepare yourself to be taken out first, fellow member of our kind."

Fourteen finished quietly. Sleif answered while continuing to walk without stopping:

"Impossible. I will only shatter when all contemptible Wathes have disappeared from this world—That is my wish as the most ancient knight."

Just as she was about to disappear from view...

While the figure of her back gave off an aura akin to a martyr's, she finally said:

"Hence, when that moment arrives, I shall gladly destroy myself."

Part 3

"In other words, through a ritual for delineating an area, that spear will produce a 'territory' governed by a specific rule. Indeed, strictly speaking, it's not a weapon but a flagpole for putting up a flag and marking a domain. A blade is attached only for the purpose of piercing the ground's foundation and interlopers."

"..."

"Originating from the time of the Crusades, the spear apparently came to be cursed due to many things that happened during the founding of Crusader states. Due to a spear's structure, it accumulates power through harming local inhabitants, spilling blood over the land. Yes, as a result, that spear was likely used to massacre indigenous populations in the past. Then the domain is gradually delineated according to the locations where blood had flowed."

He grew increasingly excited while he explained. In order to avoid getting left behind, Un Izoey sped up her thoughts and said at the same time:

"Meaning that... The domain will circle around the place marked red with blood?"

"Indeed. Just like how I circled the map on the Draconians' ship."

Then this time, the area covered almost the entire town. What was going to happen next after that?

Un Izoey frowned and recalled what Pakuaki had said at the start.

"You said governed by a specific rule, what does that mean?"

"The rule they have decided to enact this time—Yes, it must be ordinary and unremarkable for them, identical to the rule they've enacted to this date. In other words, all that has changed this time is merely the location."

"...?"

Pakuaki finally pulled his body forward away from the back of the chair, resting one elbow on the table instead. Then instead of looking at Un Izoey, he faced the door of the Lab Chief's room and said:

"That spear—Its official name is the «Nation Founding Flag Spear of the Crusaders». Apart from the one Sleif brought here, there currently exist multiple spears in the world. *The rest had all marked territories in other places since the past.*"

The instant Pakuaki said that, a massive crash was heard from behind Un Izoey. She looked back.

Carrying tea into the room, Amanda had a face full of shock, dropping the tray from her hands. Her eyes wide, her entire body trembling, she was in panic with total loss of composure.

Instead of reprimanding Amanda for her clumsiness, Pakuaki grinned and continued:

"Speaking of which, you know as well, right? Oh dear~ I was originally thinking if we could manage to steal one, but unfortunately, the plan failed."

"Th-That thing is in this country...? I-In other words!"

Hearing Amanda asking in a hoarse voice, Pakuaki nodded.

"Indeed. In other words, even at the cost of shrinking the territory they have maintained to this date, they intend to establish a new territory here. Just as I mentioned earlier, when the time comes, they will probably be enacting the same rule as in the their original territory."

"And that rule is?"

Un Izoey glanced at Amanda then asked Pakuaki. Amanda probably knew as well, but right now, she looked like she was in no state to answer. Because she simply kept trembling.

"Very simple. The knights belong to the same organization, carrying the same will, possessing the same thoughts, working towards the same goal. The rule is something akin to turning the territory into 'a place existing for their sake.' On the subject of territory, I think this is a very correct definition."

"My question: inquiring specifically the unknown of what kind of situation will result."

Pakuaki nodded as though going "good question" then held up his fingers one after another.

"The effects brought by that rule can mainly be divided into two types, although these are my deductions based on the effects in the territory where the rule has already been enacted. One of the effects is a holy war effect on a defined group of people. The territory will become a space existing for the purpose of their victory, where they can draw out their full power. Even someone like you, the level of fighting spirit generated will be different depending on whether you're guarding your tribe's sacred grounds or having a battle in a public washroom in front of the train station, right? Something along those lines. Within their domain, their power—stamina, physical strength, muscle strength, energy, endurance, concentration, vitality, mental strength, recovery, attention, instinct, unity—anyway, all of these powers will be augmented. So, for what purpose are they establishing their territory in this town? Very simple, because by doing so, it makes destruction easier—namely, the destruction of Wathes. Whether Fear-in-Cube, Muramasa or other cursed existences."

"...!"

Un Izoey gasped. The second finger went up without stopping. She could not stop it either.

"The second type of effect is that the rule will also produce changes in the land itself. The territory is the land they desire, a land existing simply for their sake. Conversely, it is land that could not possibly bring benefits to those in opposition to them. The concept of 'place existing for their sake' will overwrite that land's original meaning with absolute priority. Hence, suppose somewhere within the territory, there was a purifying location existing for the purpose of lifting curses, then its effects will probably be lost completely. In other words—"

Pakuaki brought his hands together and interlocked his fingers on the desk with contentment, resting his chin on them. His usual pose.

Surfacing on his face was his usual smile, simply filled with amused interest.

"The Yachi house won't be a place for lifting curses anymore, losing its meaning of existence entirely."

She did not speak. She could not possibly speak.

She widened her eyes.

She simply stared at the evil grin made by the devil of the known and the unknown.

"Oh, this point is also related to the first effect. On this land, the Wathes using the Yachi house as their base of operations will panic to an unimaginable degree. With their powers bolstered by the holy war effect, those pledging allegiance to the domain will become even more capable of destroying Fear-in-Cube and the others with ease—Ultimately, the result is very simple. If one needed to explain this town's 'past' and 'future', a single sentence would suffice."

Then he said it—

Just as he claimed, it really was very simple—At the same time, it was an extremely depressing sentence.

"They are simply drawing out their true power at last, to seriously obliterate the so-called 'Yachi House.'"

Part 4

The next day, Un Izoey went to school.

Naturally, it was for attending class.

It was also because she had nothing she needed to do apart from that.

"Good morning, Un-chan~!"

"Good morning, I greet with this kind of greeting."

"Ehhh, Fear-chan, Akki and the others haven't come to school. Did you know?"

"My statement: I state the truth that everything is unknown."

"I see... Hmm~ There's no point asking about Konoha-chan who comes and goes with them, but even Kirika-chan hasn't come to school too~ I don't know what happened. It's so mysterious!"

"M-M-M-M-Maybe there's a flu going around!? Hmm~ I'm so worried! Konoha-san!"

After leaving the noisy pair aside, Un Izoey discreetly swept her gaze across the classroom where a fair number of desks were empty. These few seats will remain empty today, she thought. Or perhaps, for quite a long while. Or perhaps—

"..."

She started class as usual. Although it was all basic knowledge, for someone like her who had lived in an undeveloped land until now, this was an important process in turning the unknown into the known. She must not take things lightly. However, she felt inexplicably unsettled today, lacking in concentration.

Change was happening while class was in progress.

Rumbling sounds were suddenly heard throughout the school yard. Literally, the sound descended from the sky.

It was not only sound. Powerful wind pressure was making the trees shake and the window glass vibrate nonstop.

Everyone looked at the window then stared in shock with mouth agape.

—A massive transport helicopter was preparing to land in this school yard.

Instantly, Un Izoey recalled what Pakuaki had said yesterday.

(No way... The Lab Chief was referring to this...!)

"However, the effect still cannot be activated just by delineating the land's boundary. The final step requires the *owner himself* to hold the spear and stab it into the ground in the central area of the domain. Not the subordinate who was borrowing the spear temporarily, only responsible for spreading the blood of local residents and drawing the boundary."

"Oh..."

"Hence—Once preparations are complete, the other side ought to make an appearance. Appearing in the central area of this delineated domain—A place with exposed soil at the same time. It is the location I observed and a place that you guys are very familiar with. Or perhaps, he drew up his territory using that location as the center? This point is still unknown."

"To me, the Lab Chief's words are almost all unknown."

He shrugged while he spoke:

"Apart from that, the answer is obvious who is going to appear—the true owner of the «Nation Founding Flag Spear of the Crusaders». In other words, the owner

of all the other spears stabbed into the original *dominion* out in the remote countryside of England. An existence ruling over that *dominion* like a king... Indeed."

Listening to this point, Un Izoey finally understood.

There was only one answer. So clear that it could not be mistaken, the worst answer—

Un Izoey looked down at the scene below from the classroom window and groaned.

She muttered the same answer as Pakuaki at the time.

"The Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion's... Lord...!"

The giant helicopter landed inside the vast and open school yard.

The rotor stopped spinning and silence returned at long last.

Staring at the school yard, the students suddenly discovered a girl kneeling on the ground behind the landed helicopter. In addition to gestures, together with the fact that she was wearing a visor-like helmet and dressed in attire resembling light armor, many people would surely have gathered the correct impression of "really like a knight."

The helicopter's rear cabin door opened and a new figure emerged.

Calmly and confidently, he took a step. Before he reached the ground...

Then looking at the girl kneeling on the ground with head bowed, awaiting orders, he said:

"A stupid question it may be, but I must ask this—Are preparations in place, Dainsleif?"

"Yes, my lord."

Taking the spear the maiden knight handed over reverently with both hands—
The elderly man declared solemnly, as majestic as an old king:

"—Well then, let the founding of the 'Second Knights Dominion' begin."

Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. I am Minase Hazuki, presenting to you C³ XV!

Although the story is gradually reaching a climax, new characters are still appearing one after another. There are impish boobs / loose giant boobs / helmet boobs... Right? Although these continue to be nonsensical categories, please don't mind them. As a side note, let me explain that the loose giant boobs are even larger than Konoha's, the most heavyweight class in this world. They'll bounce and sway this way and that. Oh, there's muscular boobs too! Perhaps a nipple might slip out in the illustrations by accident! Look forward to it! ...Somehow it feels like I said something similar back in Volume 11.

Well then, this volume's plot is related to Haruaki's birthday with all kinds of situations taking place. To have everyone celebrating his birthday with him, Haruaki is truly blessed with a fulfilling life. Damn it! By the way, although it's possible no one is interested, but the author's birthday is April 29. This seems to have been mentioned before somewhere, but this particular day has always been a national holiday despite going through the transformations from Emperor's Birthday to Greenery Day then Shouwa Day. In other words, for my entire life, I've never experienced people celebrating my birthday at school ever. Damn it... After class, other people must have had classmates singing happy birthday to them, right...? Returning from the washroom, they would even find birthday

presents in their desks, given by shy childhood friends who were unable to be upfront with their feelings...! Nuahhh, unforgivable! If only my birthday was on an ordinary day! That's why this kind of grudge might have been injected into this volume's story, maybe, maybe not.

So, just as I mentioned in the previous volume's afterword, this series is approaching its conclusion. I expect the next volume to be the final one. But since I still haven't completely finalized part of the content, it's possible the volume might be divided into two parts. In any case, it's decided that the story will end with the next incident.

As things stand, I will immediately start writing the final volume once I finish this afterword. But as soon as I think that it's going to be the last volume, I can't help but feel a little sad and stressful too. But conversely, once everything is finished, I think I will feel even more rewarded in some way. At the same time, I will also pray that readers who have supported the story all this time will get something out of it. Rather, in order to make sure everyone gets rewarded, I must pour in everything I can to do my best. Nuhoho, I'd better hurry and start writing—!

Finally, I'd like to express my thanks again to everyone who had contributed their care and effort towards this volume. Editor in charge, Yuasa-sama, thanks for putting up with all the trouble every time. Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, thank you for drawing beautiful and exquisite illustrations every time! I'm so sorry that you still need to design new characters even though the end of the story is approaching. However, I think there will still be one or two new characters in the final volume (sweat drops). I-I continue to rely on you one last time...!

And of course, to all the readers who have stayed faithfully with this long story until now—I am truly grateful to you! The ending is not far away, so I would be deeply honored if you could enjoy this story together to the very end.

Minase Hazuki